

“I wait to finally be considered”: Intersectionality and Visual Sovereignty as Resistance in the  
Work of Thirza Cuthand

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## ABSTRACT

“I wait to finally be considered”: Intersectionality and Visual Sovereignty as Resistance in the Work of Thirza Cuthand

Lisa Aalders

This thesis takes a look at the work of video artist Thirza Cuthand to rethink how resistance is used and discussed in a film studies context. Cuthand’s work uses an intimate, honest and often humorous approach to explore her experiences as a Two-Spirited Butch Lesbian from Little Pine First Nation. Although the video work of Thirza Cuthand has been shown across the country and internationally in spaces such as the National Gallery of Canada and in festivals like *Tribeca*, *MIX Brasil Festival of Sexual Diversity*, and *Inside Out, Toronto*, this is the first in-depth exploration of her work that has taken place. It focuses on six of her short-length works: *Working Baby Dyke Theory* (1997), *Anhedonia* (2001), *Untouchable* (1998), *Love & Numbers* (2004), *Colonization: the Second Coming* (1996) and *Boi Oh Boi* (2012). This thesis uses Cuthand’s work with two primary goals in mind. First, it uses Cuthand’s videos to examine the usefulness of intersectionality as a framework worthy of greater consideration in a film studies context. Specifically, this thesis uses intersectionality to highlight the complicated ways in which power and resistance express themselves across different identity axes. Second, this thesis employs Michelle H. Raheja’s concept of visual sovereignty to suggest that resistance need not be considered merely a reactive gesture but a generative one as well. In doing so, this thesis seeks to use Cuthand’s videos to reorient discussions of resistance in order to challenge a self/Other binary.

## Dedication

First and foremost, I would like to thank Tom Waugh for acting as an essential guiding force throughout this project. Thank you for your knowledge, patience and trust in the project I wanted to pursue. I would also like to thank Luca Caminati and Marc Steinberg for helping me to figure out what I was arguing in the early stages of this project. Thank you also to my peers, who helped me along the way. Special thanks to Kaia Scott, Julia Huggins, Jake Bagshaw, and Alan Jones for reading my early drafts and offering some much appreciated feedback. I must also thank my family for their encouragement and unwavering support despite my less-than-lucrative field of study. Thank you to all of the people I met during my time in Montreal. To Jennifer Quintanilla and Christina Galianos, I am forever grateful for your friendship. I conclude with a very special thank you to Thirza Cuthand for allowing me the chance to interview her, and (of course) for producing the work that first inspired me.

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## **Introduction**

*“When I started out I was sixteen years old. It was ’95. There wasn’t a lot of representation of teenage lesbians at the time. Like there was nothing out there. It really came about because I wanted to create more representation of people like me and people in my community and that’s kind of been like a driving force ever since.” -Thirza Cuthand (Interview)*

This is a project about identity, representation and the power of the moving image to resist and to build. More specifically, this is a project that looks to the video work of artist Thirza Cuthand to think through questions related to the latter. By perusing a detailed textual analysis of her videos, I consider the lived experience of both identity and uneven power relations, the complicated ways in which they operate and what resistance in media-making might look like.

The first time I saw the work of video artist Thirza Cuthand, I was attending an event at SAW Gallery in Ottawa in the fall of 2013. The screening showcased an assortment of her videos, ranging from the work she had made as a teenager through to her most current videos. These were videos that took on a wide range of issues, variously exploring matters of race, gender identity, sexuality and mental health from the perspective of a self-identifying Two Spirited Butch Lesbian. I was struck by the immediate and affective quality of what I saw. It was work produced with such honesty, vulnerability and humour. More than that, they were works whose impact far outlasted the duration of the screening. I offer this perhaps as a caveat to address the fact that while I use her work to explore a variety of issues related to race, gender identity, sexuality and mental health, this academic focus on her videos is incapable of articulating or reflecting the immediate and affective quality of her work. Nonetheless, I hope this thesis performs the work it is capable of. Thus, I use this thesis to interrogate ideas of intersectionality and resistance in film studies, while also opening up a much needed space to talk about Cuthand's work.

Given the concern with identity that this thesis will pursue, it seems relevant to foreground my own position as a white settler approaching Cuthand’s work. As such, I am aware of the need to work actively to avoid reproducing the kind of colonialist discourse of speaking

for Indigenous peoples.<sup>1</sup> I do this in part by grounding my work with Indigenous perspectives on film and media. It should also be noted that my examination of Cuthand's video seeks not to serve as any kind of definitive exploration of her work but rather to offer up perspectives and interpretations that function to interrogate resistance.

## **Towards a Thesis**

This is not a thesis arguing for the particular exceptionality of Cuthand's work. Rather, I am drawn to Cuthand because of her work's complicated articulation of issues related to her identity as a "Two Spirited Butch Lesbian" living in a contemporary Canadian settler-colonial context (*ThirzaCuthand.com*).<sup>2</sup> While questions related to Indigenous and queer identity are hardly exclusive to Cuthand's videos, I have chosen to focus on her work in particular because of the sheer number of issues her videos look at, what they can tell us about the lived experience of identity, and the imaginative ways in which they give depth to these issues. Cuthand creatively and cleverly mixes autobiography with surreal humour to offer an understanding of the self in relation to systems of power that is richly complicated. As such, I believe it will offer the perfect terrain with which to think through how different factors of identity operate and interact with each other to form a complex web of relations and how power operates within and across that system.

I understand power in the Foucauldian sense, operating as a dispersed force across and through systems, institutions, communities and individuals. My understanding of power rests on the belief that it possesses the ability to operate internally (*Discipline and Punish* 202). To this extent, I am concerned with power relations "in terms of the everyday life of men" [*sic*]

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<sup>1</sup> I have decided to employ the term "Indigenous" in large sections of this thesis in an effort to emphasize connections that extend beyond particular nations and peoples and to make a claim for the broader application of ideas that are presented in my research. This is not an attempt to erase the specificity of Cuthand's identity as Cree, and I have attempted to use more specific terms in situations where I am dealing with a more particular context.

<sup>2</sup> As far as appropriate pronoun usage is concerned, at the time this thesis was written Cuthand uses feminine pronouns to refer to herself on her personal blog (*ThirzaCuthand.com*).



(*Discipline and Punish* 205). However, my aim is not to pursue Foucauldian analysis of Cuthand's work. Rather, my goal is to consider how Cuthand's work documents and challenges the everyday iterations of power she experiences in her life.

Ultimately, I use Cuthand's work in order to consider issues of resistance and intersectionality in film studies. In part, this was inspired by my observation that intersectionality remains a largely marginal concept in film studies. Intersectionality is the basic idea that identity is a polyvalent construction composed of multiple intersecting factors—be it race, gender, sexuality, (dis)ability, class, national belonging or any number of different axes of identity—which operate in tandem and should therefore be studied as such. And because identity functions in this complicated way, power must also be understood in relation to this interplay between several identity factors. Despite this, intersectionality has not been meaningfully integrated into film studies as a whole. Of course, the idea is not wholly absent as the work of Vivian M. May and Beth A. Ferri for example can attest to its use within the discipline and certainly many scholars have integrated some of the basic ideas of intersectionality even if they have not labelled it as such. However, the fact that this process of integration has yet to take place means that intersectionality's challenges and points of contestation also remain unaddressed. As such, this thesis seeks to both integrate *and* interrogate intersectionality and to use the specifics of Cuthand's work to demonstrate the kind of opportunities intersectionality affords.

From there, I will adopt this intersectional lens so that I may re-examine understandings of resistance in film and media. In order to do this, I borrow from Michelle H. Raheja's concept of visual sovereignty. It is a term used by Raheja to consider Indigenous film and media as a space in which sovereignty may be asserted. In doing so, Raheja is able to move away from looking at sovereignty strictly within the limits of Western jurisprudence and to instead consider it as something that can be asserted from the perspective of Indigenous cultures as a dynamic and creative act that can occur on their own terms (194). Therefore, I firstly examine how visual sovereignty operates in the work of Thirza Cuthand. But I also want to use this notion of visual sovereignty to revisit notions of resistance in film and media. The problem with the use of resistance as it currently stands is that it is a term very often used but hardly ever defined

(Einwohner and Hollander 534). This suggests that the meaning of the term is generally taken for granted although in actuality it is employed in a divergent number of ways. Thus, part of my task will be to clarify what I mean by resistance. This will not be an attempt to provide any definitive meaning. Rather, I will carve out a particular definition that I believe will help me to challenge the self/Other binary that plagues many discussions of marginalized voices in film and media. This is indeed a significant problem when talking about resistance since even those wishing to draw attention to unequal power structures can fall into a trap of positioning everything in relation to the dominant power. Of course, it is not my wish to ignore the very real role oppressive structures play. Rather, my intention is to use the discussion of visual sovereignty to open up an avenue for talking about resistance wherein the resisting party gets to occupy the position of subject. Thus, I will use this thesis to think about how we can conceive of resistance both in terms of how it is commonly understood as an act in response to the powerful but also as a generative act that creates its own cultural space and exists on its own terms. In this way, I want to propose an understanding of resistance that sees it as a creative act in both senses of the word—as an act drawing from the imagination and as an act of bringing into existence.

Given my dual focus of intersectionality and resistance, unfortunately this thesis does not have the room to offer a detailed analysis of intertextual considerations. As such, examination of how Cuthand's work fits into a broader context of video artists, queer and Indigenous artists remains an area for further research. Ultimately, I will instead use the video work of Thirza Cuthand to complicate resistance in film studies to better accommodate the reality of multiple intersecting frameworks of identity and to conceptualize it as a generative force that disrupts a self/Other binary. And although I have so far described them as separate tasks, my investigations of intersectionality and visual sovereignty will very much inform each other. By using the specifics of Cuthand's work, I ground my research in order to effectively describe what I am proposing and what this looks like on a textual level.

## Introduction to Cuthand

While my goals with this thesis extend beyond the scope of Cuthand's work itself, her videos will form the basis of this project. As such, I believe it is fundamentally important to begin by outlining who Cuthand is, the form her work takes and the communities her work addresses.

Born in 1978, Thirza Jean Cuthand grew up in Saskatoon and began making videos at the age of sixteen. As the epigraph of this thesis notes, Cuthand got into videomaking because of the lack of representation of teenage lesbians she saw at the time. As Cuthand describes, “When I first came out when I was fourteen, I didn’t really know that you could be a lesbian that young—that you could know that young” (Cuthand, Interview). While this desire to see oneself reflected is an issue I will return to in my discussion of visual sovereignty, it is suffice to say that representation plays an important role in Cuthand’s work and the way that she approaches her projects. In terms of specific artists who inspired her early videomaking practices, she names Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan, two multidisciplinary artists from Winnipeg whose work examines lesbian identity and understandings of the lesbian body (. As Cuthand herself describes, “I saw [their work] at the *Out on Screen* in Vancouver, and I realized it was something I could see myself doing. It made making videos seem more accessible” (Interview).

Stylistically, Cuthand adopts a similarly accessible format that flows from her use of basic camera technology and her direct approach to storytelling. Frequently mixing the personal and autobiographical with the silly and somewhat absurd, her stories often employ humour to approach serious discussions of racism, homophobia and mental illness.<sup>3</sup> She does so with

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<sup>33</sup> I have debated about which term to use but ultimately decided on mental illness to discuss a phenomenon which has variously been referred to as madness, mental health, and mental distress (amongst a myriad of other terms). My reasoning for this lies in the fact that this is the term Cuthand uses. Because my research is specifically grounded in Cuthand’s videos it therefore seems like the most appropriate term to use. The challenge of using this term is that it foregrounds a medicalized narrative over sociologically-driven factors. However, ultimately my

whatever technological means she has access to and more often than not funds the projects herself (Interview). This frequently translates into a lo-fi production quality with her reliance on basic props (dolls, cut-outs, stuffed animals) creating an intimate and homemade feeling. Since her work is typically structured around a monologue that she delivers, the spoken word plays an important role in her work. As such, this thesis will pay close attention to both the visual elements that make up her videos as well as her use of voice and first-person storytelling.

Cuthand's earliest work, *Lessons in Baby Dyke Theory* was produced with a camcorder given to her by her grandfather (Interview). It features a frustrated teenage Cuthand trying to find where the other lesbians are in Saskatoon. It is a short piece that exhibits the characteristic off-beat humour and wit that accompanies most of her works. It is also a work that characteristically foregrounds the issue of identity and the need to manage a sense of marginality. This work helped garner her attention from other queer media artists, appearing in the 1995 edition of Calgary's gay and lesbian film festival *The Fire I've Become*, a screening that also prompted her first controversy. At the time, tension was mounting around the funding of the festival from concerned religious fundamentalists who argued that taxpayer money should not be going towards what they termed a "pornographic film orgy" (Warner 335). Garnering enough outraged publicity, the issue was eventually brought to the Alberta legislature. By Cuthand's own account, her video was accused of being a "lesbian recruiting video" (Interview). It is an incident that points certainly to the provocative nature of Cuthand's work as well as its capacity to unsettle and disturb hegemonic powers.

From there, Cuthand proceeded to make dozens of short videos and films, appearing in a variety of different contexts. While Cuthand's works may have started out being screened in LGBT festivals, it was not long before she began addressing her identity as a biracial Aboriginal of Plains Cree and Scots descent. As Cuthand noted in a 2002 interview:

[W]hat's interesting is the way my films have been crossing over from the queer festivals to the Native festivals. The response has been surprisingly positive. [...] It's

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research will be concerned with the latter, a fact I hope will destabilize the medical character of the term.

funny because I came out [to Vancouver] expecting to get involved in the queer community, and I *have*, but I more and more feel part of the Native community. My parents are both biracial, and I'm just now realizing how comfortable I feel making films for Native people. I think it's a community that can contain a lot of different elements. (Eisner 402)

While this thesis will not focus on the reception of Cuthand's work. I think it is important to keep in mind the audiences her work addresses and serves. According to Cuthand, her videos are primarily in dialogue with her different communities (Interview). Therefore, the perspective I adopt to approach visual sovereignty is not about the individual producing representation solely for the sake of the self but for the communities that make up that identity

Although Cuthand's works have been examined by a handful of writers, this will be the first in-depth and long-length analysis of her work. Existing writing includes Ken Eisner's chapter on "First Nations Women Filmmakers," featured in the anthology *Women Filmmakers: Refocusing*. Published in 2002, Eisner's chapter takes a look at several filmmakers and examines Cuthand as a young videomaker transitioning to adulthood. Meanwhile Jean Bruce discusses Cuthand in "The Art of Making Do: Queer Canadian Girls Make Movies", focusing on her video "Helpless Maiden Makes An 'I' Statement" to discuss Cuthand's repurposing of popular images. In addition, Lisa Tatonetti's chapter "Affect, Female Masculinity, and the Embodied Space Between: Two-Spirit Traces in Thirza Cuthand's Experimental Film" examines Cuthand's more recent *Boi Oh Boi* (2012) through an affective lens to think about Cuthand's Two-Spirit positioning. Meanwhile, Thomas Waugh's anthology of Queer Canadian cinema, *The Romance of Transgression in Canada: Queering Sexualities, Nations, Cinemas* includes a brief description of Cuthand and her work. While I will draw on this literature in my own work, I expand the existing discussion to consider several of her works, including *Love & Numbers* (2004) and *Anhedonia* (2001), which have not received as much scholarly attention as they deserve. My analysis will also differ with its emphasis on an intersectional understanding of identity as opposed to examining Cuthand according to a particular identity lens. And although it may not

be the primary goal of this thesis, I hope that my spotlight on Cuthand's work will encourage others to look at her work.

## **Methodology**

### **a) Introduction to Intersectionality**

As it is a concept that will be foundational to the research I pursue, I will begin by outlining what intersectionality is and how I plan to use it. It should be noted that a more detailed literature review will occur in the first chapter as I believe it will function more effectively by directly preceding my intersectional analysis. To offer but a brief outline, intersectionality refers to "the mutually constructed nature of social division and the ways these are experienced, reproduced and resisted in everyday life" (Taylor 38). It was popularized in the 1990s in women's and gender studies as a way to account for the tendency in feminism and other social and legal frameworks to treat issues related to gender as separate from other factors such as race, sexuality, ability, etc. Thus, its role was to address the way in which axes of identity are commonly treated as "mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis" (Crenshaw 57). It suggests that without taking into account the interaction and co-constituency of different axes of identity, analysis remains insufficient in expressing the full complexity of the lived experience of identity and uneven power relations.

More than just drawing attention to the limitation of single axis frameworks, subsequent research on intersectionality has also tried to emphasize the ways in which categories of identity are themselves shifting, changing entities. As Yvette Taylor notes, "Notions of 'intersectionality' have developed from initial attempts at identifying crossover points in axes of difference, such as gender, race and class, to more sophisticated attempts at highlighting their mutual construction, embeddedness and movement, rather than static being" (39). As I will investigate further, this is an essential task if intersectionality is to avoid unwittingly reinforcing essentialist understandings of identity. While the challenges facing this task will be explored in greater length in the first chapter, for now it is sufficient to say that the desire to complicate discussions of identity and

power while also problematizing the categories that make up those terms is a job easier said than done when faced with the practical limitations of research.

While intersectionality is an idea popularized with Kimberlé Crenshaw's examination of the inadequacy of the American legal system in accounting for multiply burdened identities, it is a concept that has been put towards a large variety of contexts and uses. Most notably, it was taken up and widely adopted by women and gender studies. One of the most productive, though challenging things about intersectionality is the way in which it cuts across disciplines and demands knowledge from a variety of those disciplines. As such, it disrupts the kind of common categorization that dominates academia.

Perhaps for this reason, it has remained largely in the background of film and media studies. Following in the footsteps of those film and media scholars who have used intersectionality in their work, this project aims to demonstrate the usefulness of an intersectional framework to film studies. In order to do this, I will begin by examining the history of intersectionality and the challenges that have been leveled against it. From there, I will focus on three of Cuthand's works—*Working Baby Dyke Theory* (1997), *Anhedonia* (2001), and *Untouchable* (1998)—in order to ground my discussion of intersectionality in the specifics of her videos. This will involve drawing from a number of different disciplines and sub-disciplines, including critical race studies, Indigenous studies, queer and sexuality studies, and gender studies. Through textual analysis, I will examine how these works provide a complicated portrait of both identity and mechanisms of power that operate through axes of the self. In particular, I will consider the ways in which her videos emphasize connections across different factors of identity in such a way that it is difficult if not impossible to talk about one without talking about the others. In this way, I demonstrate the importance of considering these factors in relation to each other via the framework of intersectionality.

## **b) Visual Sovereignty as Resistance**

Having demonstrated the important work an intersectional approach reveals in the videos of Thirza Cuthand, I will then use said approach to reconsider the way in which we talk about resistance in film and media. To do this, I will borrow the concept of visual sovereignty, an idea coined by scholar Michelle H. Raheja in her book, *Reservation Reelism: Redfacing, Visual Sovereignty, and Representations of Native Americans in Film*. While I will go into greater detail in chapter two examining resistance and the origins of visual sovereignty, for now I want to offer a brief overview of visual sovereignty and the kind of work I see it performing.

Raheja's concept of visual sovereignty builds off of existing discussions in Indigenous scholarship that seek to expand and complicate notions of sovereignty. As such, Raheja is interested in complicating notions of sovereignty in such a way that it moves sovereignty beyond the narrow scope prescribed by Western power systems and towards an act that can be creatively asserted by Indigenous populations. Thus, she understands it as a means to "interven[e] in larger discussions of Native American sovereignty by locating and advocating for Indigenous cultural and political power both within and outside of Western legal jurisprudence" (193-94).

For Raheja, asserting visual sovereignty also involves "the possibility of engaging and deconstructing white-generated representations of Indigenous people" (193). Raheja's use of the word "possibility" in this statement points to the way in which visual sovereignty may act in a confrontational manner by actively engaging with harmful stereotypes, but it does not have to. Thus, as the term sovereignty suggests, sometimes resistance can look like the process of producing and/or reproducing one's own culture. This rings especially true given the history of genocide in the Americas against Indigenous peoples, part of which was directly targeted at the cultural. As Raheja notes:

The visual—particularly film, video, and new media—is a germinal and exciting site for exploring how sovereignty can be a creative act of self-representation that has the potential to both undermine stereotypes of Indigenous peoples and to strengthen what Robert Allen Warrior terms the 'intellectual health' of communities in the wake of genocide and colonialism. (194)



In order to think through resistance along these two dynamics of the confrontational and the generative, I will examine three of Cuthand's works—*Love & Numbers* (2004), *Colonization: the Second Coming* (1996), and *Boi Oh Boi* (2012)—to consider what these different faces of resistance may concretely look like. More specifically, I want to do this from an intersectional perspective that takes into account not just her identity as First Nations but her identity as a Two Spirited Butch Lesbian who deals with mental illness. I believe this is important for understanding Cuthand's work as well as complicating conceptualizations of resistance. After all, it is not just her identity as Indigenous that has been neglected and disparaged by the Western history of visual representation.

Ultimately, I approach this project from a perspective that understands the moving image as a place of consistent contestation between media makers, media viewers and different communities vying to change established patterns of representation. It is not my intention to ignore the very real power dynamics that inform visual representation or to ignore the fact that Cuthand's project of self-representation can hardly compete with mainstream media in terms of global reach and economic power. Nonetheless, this project concerns itself with the fringes in order to think about resistance because I believe it to be a fruitful space for marginalized communities to produce alternative visions of self-representation, self-determination and sovereignty.

## **Chapter Preview**

While I have used the introduction to provide an overview of some of the key concepts underpinning my methodology, I have decided to allow each chapter to go further into depth about the corresponding topic. As such, in the first chapter entitled “Interrogating Intersectionality: Identity and Power in *Working Baby Dyke Theory*, *Anhedonia* and *Untouchable*,” I begin my investigation of intersectionality by first exploring its origins and some of the different ways it has been used. Although I outline intersectionality as a strategy worthy of greater implementation into a film and media context, an important part of this process

is to first interrogate some of its limitations, complications and the like. After identifying such problems, I outline my own intervention in intersectionality and how I see it productively translating into a film and media context. I follow this theoretical consideration by applying an intersectional framework to three of Cuthand's works: *Working Baby Dyke Theory* (1997), *Anhedonia* (2001) and *Untouchable* (1998). In *Working Baby Dyke Theory*, I explore age as an often overlooked but important vector for thinking about the expression of power. Specifically, I think about how Cuthand's video demonstrates how narratives that serve to disempower youth recall colonial tropes similarly used to disempower Indigenous peoples. I look to these parallels to consider how power is exercised through recurring patterns across different vectors of identity. I also consider how Cuthand's work serves to challenge these tropes, specifically looking at the use of her humour and her voice. This then leads into my discussion of *Anhedonia*, in which I examine Cuthand's relation to her mental illness. In this case, I look at how narratives used to marginalize those with mental illness echo similar (neo)colonial narratives of personal responsibility aimed at Indigenous peoples and how Cuthand's video challenges such tropes. I take this analysis a step further to consider how the narratives used to disenfranchise Indigenous people encourage the very conditions from which mental illness springs. Such an examination therefore stresses the mutual construction of axes of identity, emphasizing their generative capacity and the importance of looking at how they produce each other. Building off of this idea, I use *Untouchable* to offer a broader consideration of the kind of narratives that sustain power imbalance across different axes of identity. I focus in particular on narratives of protection, which I argue serve to disempower those they purport to help. I therefore use an intersectional lens in this chapter to approach Cuthand's work to demonstrate the different connections that can be made across different vectors of identity in an attempt to think about the mutual unravelling of expressions of power.

The second chapter is called "Rethinking Resistance: Visual Sovereignty in *Love & Numbers*, *Colonization: the Second Coming*, and *Boi Oh Boi*. This chapter begins by looking at how scholarship tends to approach the topic of resistance as an exclusively reactive gesture and the kind of self/Other power dynamic this reproduces. I then go into greater depth about Raheja's

concept of visual sovereignty to think about how it repositions resistance to include a generative quality. I use the three aforementioned Cuthand videos to explore some of the ways visual sovereignty may be expressed and how it opens up new opportunities for talking about resistance. I begin by looking at *Love & Numbers* to establish the stakes of looking at visual sovereignty in the context of sparse representation and its effect on those who are marginalized. This in turn leads to considering the way in which Cuthand's voice and body are positioned in this work to challenge the hegemonic order of images and assert her own sovereign vision of self. I develop this idea but in a different context when I examine *Colonization: the Second Coming*. My examination focuses on the video's embrace and overhaul of the science fiction invasion narrative. Viewing it from a distinctly intersectional perspective that takes into account how Cuthand's video *queers* and *decolonizes* the popular genre, I locate *Colonization: the Second Coming* as an attempt to refocus the framework of the traditional invasion film in order to highlight the colonial hypocrisy that emerges once the white heteropatriarchal hero is displaced from the genre's centre. Examining the mechanics of how Cuthand's film destabilizes the assumptions on which such invasion films are based, I proceed to examine the generative role of humour in the video and the productive role of form in allowing Cuthand to assert a new narrative. Lastly, I use *Boi Oh Boi* to focus on the body as a site of contestation where larger anxieties play out and are (quite literally) embodied. I examine *Boi Oh Boi* as a unique and proud portrait of Butchness, in which the elements of performance and play function to explore a conception of gender that destabilizes traditional gender binaries in addition to common transition narratives. I also use this video to consider how her work articulates a fluid space with which to think through ideas related to gender, sexuality and identity. This fluidity, I argue, is also an essential part of my understanding of visual sovereignty and resistance, which I ultimately offer as a malleable strategy capable of incorporating intersectional perspectives and both reactive and generative modes. Thus, ultimately this thesis is not concerned with arguing for a definitive understanding of resistance but is rather looking to explore different possibilities for the way we think about resistance and the work that this can do.

**Chapter One:**  
**Interrogating Intersectionality:**  
**Identity and power in *Working Baby Dyke Theory*, *Anhedonia* and *Untouchable***

**Intersectionality: its origins and its uses**

To begin, I look to Cuthand to articulate the significance of considering identity and power in an intersectional framework. She explains that “because [my video work is] a lot about race and gender and sexuality it also means it’s about racism, homophobia and sexism. I think those are political things really. I think people kind of talk down about identity politics but it impacts our lives” (Interview). Taking this quote from Cuthand as its starting point, this chapter concerns itself with the political nature of identity. More specifically it is about the complicated dynamics through which power is expressed across different axes of identity. I approach this discussion through the lens of intersectionality and begin with an examination of its origins and uses. This will lead me to a discussion of the challenges facing intersectionality as a framework before I ultimately put it to work in considering the iterations of power and identity in three of Cuthand’s earlier works: *Working Baby Dyke Theory* (1997), *Anhedonia* (2001), and *Untouchable* (1998).

I begin my investigation of intersectionality with Kimberlé Crenshaw and her discussion of Sojourner Truth’s famous “Ain’t I a Woman” speech at the 1851 Women’s Rights Conference in Akron, Ohio. Amidst the hisses of dissenting men, Truth challenged the narrowly prescribed terms of femininity and womanhood by maintaining, “I have ploughed and planted and gathered into barns, and no man could head me—and ain’t I a woman? I would work as much and eat as much as a man—when I could get it—and bear the lash as well! And ain’t I a woman?” (qtd. in Crenshaw 66). Yet as Crenshaw noted in her seminal 1989 text on intersectionality “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics,” Truth’s words serve also as a challenge to white feminists. As Crenshaw writes:

When Sojourner Truth rose to speak, many white women urged that she be silenced, fearing that she would divert attention from women's suffrage to emancipation. Truth, once permitted to speak, recounted the horrors of slavery, and its particular impact on Black women. (...) Thus, this 19th-century Black feminist challenged not only patriarchy, but she also challenged white feminists wishing to embrace Black women's history to relinquish their vestedness in whiteness. (Crenshaw 66).

I offer this as a starting point for thinking about intersectionality for a variety of reasons. For one, I think it offers a helpful example of identity as a complex product that cannot be contained by simpler categorizations. Thus, it is Truth's specific experience as a Black woman that challenges the discourse of both white patriarchy and white feminism. In addition, I think it is helpful to use both Crenshaw's essay and Truth's words to start a conversation about intersectionality because they have been influential in inspiring the work of many other feminist and critical race scholars.<sup>4</sup> But more than that, I want to specifically highlight how Crenshaw's own work locates intersectionality as something that has been going on far longer than the term intersectionality has been in use. As Jennifer Nash describes:

Myriad feminist scholars have destabilized the notion of a universal 'woman' without explicitly mobilizing the term 'intersectionality', arguing that 'woman' itself is contested and fractured terrain, and that the experience of 'woman' is always constituted by subjects with vastly different interests. To that end, intersectionality has provided a name to a pre-existing theoretical and political commitment. (3)

In this way, when I talk about discussing the "origins" of intersectionality, I acknowledge this as a false endeavour. Instead, my intention is to highlight something of the history of intersectionality as a term and why I find it a helpful conceptual framework to use.

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<sup>4</sup> Notably, *Ain't I a Woman: Black women and feminism (1981)* is the name of a bell hooks book in which she examines the exclusionary history of feminism.

For Crenshaw, her implementation of intersectionality emerges from a specifically legal framework wherein she addresses the shortcomings of anti-discrimination laws in dealing with multiply-burdened identities. For instance, she discusses the case of *DeGraffenreid v. General Motors*, in which five Black women brought suit against the automaker because General Motors had not hired a Black woman before 1964 and all of the Black women hired after 1970 had lost their jobs. Ultimately, the court ruled in favour of General Motors by insisting that “this lawsuit must be examined to see if it states a cause of action for race discrimination, sex discrimination, or alternatively either, but not a combination of both” (qtd. in Crenshaw 59). The court reasoned that because General Motors had hired and retained black men and white women then a case could not be made for discrimination since the specific protection of “Black women” does not exist in a legal framework. Crenshaw offers several different cases to explore how the narrowly defined terms of identity—and therefore discrimination—produce a system incapable of obtaining justice for Black women.

As such, intersectionality serves to counter the long history of single-axis approaches to both identity and oppression. It therefore aims to open up space for voices and experiences that have otherwise been sidelined, ignored or limited to single axis discussions. In doing so, it offers a more complicated means of describing not only identity but power and the polyvalent ways in which they operate. Thus, the impetus fuelling discussions of intersectionality remains essential if feminism and other critical engagements are to address relations of identity and power in a complex, multifaceted manner.

Of course, Crenshaw’s emphasis on Black women locates intersectionality’s roots in a particular tradition of Black American feminism. As such, it builds on the work of thinkers such as Anna Julia Cooper, Maria Stewart, Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks and Angela Davis, to name just a few. It also distinguishes itself from approaches that were criticized for the “additive” way that they approached identity (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 62). For example, Marxist and socialist feminists used a “dual system” to theorize the relationship between patriarchy and capitalism. Subsequently, triple oppression theory sought to address the relationship of these factors to race. While it certainly builds on the knowledge this type of approach affords, intersectionality seeks

to complicate these additive strategies by emphasizing the multiple intersecting ways in which identity is formed and influenced. Therefore, intersectionality "assumes that it is impossible to fully disentangle different relations of power and that discourses and oppressive practices around important social divisions such as 'race', gender, class, and sexuality do not only play together, but are mutually constitutive of each other" (Erel et al. 59). To put it differently and somewhat more poetically: "The actuality of our layered experience is multiplicative. Multiply each of my parts together, one x one x one x one, and you have *one* indivisible being" (Wing 194).

### **Intersectionality Interrogated: Challenges and Avenues for Moving Forward**

Since its rise in popularity in Women and Gender Studies, intersectionality has been met with a series of criticisms and challenges in regard to its efficacy and feasibility. Indeed, a major concern is how to manage the complexity that risks turning intersectionality into an overwhelming task. After all, it might be a nice sentiment to say a person will take into account all of the different axes of identity but in practice this is met with some very tangible limitations. For one, there is the question of what gets to count as an axis worth considering. Inevitably, some are given more consideration over others, and these omissions often reproduce existing biases within academia. Such omissions include but are not limited to gender identity, age, disability, and mental health.

In addition, some have taken issue with the very notion of the intersection as a productive framework. According to Kath Weston, intersectionality conjures up images of a geometric model that suggests a system too simple and too neat to deal with the complexity of the matters at hand. Weston argues, "[intersectionality] portrays all axes as equivalent, all lines coming together, all of the time" (16). Echoing Weston's sentiment, Erel et al. suggest "[intersectionality] does not focus on the asymmetrical relationships of power in which these different lines of power collide or diverge in a specific geopolitical and socio-economic context" (64). Thus, without careful consideration, intersectionality as a strategy risks becoming ahistorical or devoid of specificity of context. In addition, while its purpose may be to complicate, intersectionality can

paradoxically become "a mainstreamed shortcut", one that can "instantly 'politically correct' your output the painfree way" (Erel et al. 72). As such, intersectionality devolves into a corrective buzzword rather than a sincere engagement with the complicated workings of identity and power.

Then there is the task of talking about these categories of identity while also problematizing their very categorization and drawing attention to the way they are constructed. Not doing so risks talking about such factors as if they are essential qualities rather than factors whose effects are tangibly felt but are nonetheless constructed through social discourses. Scholars adopting an intersectional lens are therefore faced with the task of talking not only about the real world effects of categories like race, sexuality, gender, disability, but also the ways in which these categorizes exist not as fixed entities but as flowing, evolving discourses.

While I have taken time to identify the challenges facing the use of intersectionality, I nonetheless believe it to still be a productive methodology worthy of greater use in film studies. Pursuing this project, I borrow from the work of other scholars who have proposed amendments or different routes for thinking through intersectionality. Therefore, I look to Kath Weston, who emphasizes the value of stories to complicate what otherwise might act as an overly simplified and rigid geometric model of oppression. She describes how "embedded in stories are particular *renditions* of gender that are already raced and classed, renditions that show people in action, chasing down the curveballs that identity throws their way" (Weston 16). In many ways, Weston's observation points to the motivating factor behind my own examination of Cuthand's work. After all, I have specifically chosen to focus on stories told through the particular lens of Cuthand's audiovisual storytelling in order to proceed with my examination.

Despite the challenges I have so far outlined, I seek to use my project to address the benefits of intersectionality as a methodology worth pursuing to a greater extent in film and media studies. This project will include taking on such challenges and offering possibilities for intervention. In part I do this by using my thesis to open up intersectional analysis to two often overlooked categories of identity: age and mental health. More specifically, my consideration of mental health and age will consider how they operate in relation to and sometimes through different identity axes. And although this project will engage with analytical categories in order



to talk about identity and power, it does not understand these categories as fixed or naturally occurring. Rather, this thesis engages with analytical categories in a way that problematizes them and reveals the way that power functions through them. Ultimately, I am committed to using the term intersectionality to describe this project because I depend on its specific academic legacy and think it a worthy methodology to import into film and media scholarship. Although I have observed that scholars like Weston take issue with the term because of the way it implies a kind of geometric approach, I wish to take this criticism into consideration but nonetheless use the term. I view this as somewhat analogous with the continued use of the term "feminism" despite its own challenges. Thus, I hope to avoid an overly simplistic "geometric" approach to intersectionality and instead use Cuthand's stories to draw out and think through the messy iterations that make up the experiences of race, gender, age, sexuality and mental health. This involves an approach that does not assume such factors act in equal ways but rather are subject to their own contextual relations.

In the end, I borrow from Elahe Haschemi Yekani, Beatrice Michaelis and Gabriele Dietze, whose investigation of intersectionality concludes with a line from Samuel Beckett: "Fail again. Fail better" (91). I mention this as a means of addressing the somewhat impossible task intersectionality presents. Striking a balance between accounting for a host of different factors while problematizing those same categories can certainly become an unwieldy task. Nonetheless, my goal is to use intersectionality not to offer a definitive intersectional account of Cuthand's videos but rather to open up a space for thinking about just some of the constructive opportunities intersectionality affords.

### **“Their toy, their pet, their mascot”:**

#### **An intersectional investigation of age in *Working Baby Dyke Theory***

I begin by focusing on what I believe is an often underappreciated and overlooked vector of power in contemporary accounts of power and identity: age. More specifically, this section concerns itself with the power adults hold over youth as a dynamic often assumed as natural and

benevolent. To do this, I look to Cuthand's *Working Baby Dyke Theory*, a video which explores themes of intergenerational relationships in both their platonic and sexual senses. While the video begins with Cuthand imagining adults as child-eating predators, it transitions into an exploration of her first friendships with older lesbians. Produced in 1997 at Video In Studios in Vancouver (now VIVO Media Arts Centre) when Cuthand was still a teenager, the video offers a unique perspective in a conversation that is significantly dominated by non-youth voices. As a vector of identity, age presents certain unique challenges. Unlike many of the other factors discussed in this chapter such as race, gender and sexuality, youth is of course a factor one literally grows out of. This creates a unique situation whereby those who may begin in a position of subjugation oftentimes grow up to later occupy the position of the powerful.<sup>5</sup> This means that the perspective of young people is often taken up by adults speaking on *behalf of* children. This is why I find *Working Baby Dyke Theory* to offer such a valuable perspective since it was produced by an actual youth. As Cuthand herself identifies: "I feel like I don't have the right to talk about [*Working Baby Dyke Theory*] anymore because I'm older now. I feel like it was really specific to the age I was when I made it" (Interview). Although age is made complicated by its ever evolving nature, I think it is an important identity vector to consider not only on its own terms but the intersectional ways it interacts with, reinforces and articulates other expressions of power. Thus, this section will look to Cuthand's *Working Baby Dyke Theory* to examine how expressions of racism, sexism and homophobia are articulated through condescending relationships towards youth. In doing so, I offer just one example of the usefulness of intersectionality in complicating discussions of power.

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<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that my particular focus on the disempowerment of youth stems from my focus on Cuthand's early work. While I wish to open up discussions about age as an important vector through which power is expressed, I recognize that my research is concerned with only one iteration of this. Indeed, age presents a unique category for exploring power precisely because of the complicated power dynamics that present themselves as both young and old can be targets. Although my work will focus on Cuthand's interactions with power as a youth (and admittedly with a focus on abuses in power), I hope that my work can nonetheless set an example for further explorations of different power dynamics that includes consideration of how older people are also marginalized and disempowered.

The video begins its exploration of intergenerational relationships with a low angle P.O.V. shot looking up at a kitchen counter where a pot sits on the stove. Cuthand's monologue begins:

When I was a child I had this very bizarre theory about why grownups treated us kids the way they did. They always treated us like second class citizens, a nuisance, something in the way. They talked down to us. They said things like: "aren't you sweet!" and "I could eat you alive!" They acted very peculiar, suspicious. I knew something was up. I must have been about 4 or 5 when I finally hit upon the truth. The reason adults treated us children so strangely was because they were planning to kill us all and eat us.

By means of a dark and biting humour, Cuthand is able to address several different but converging attitudes older people have towards younger individuals. In this instance, I understand her use of humour as being used to articulate an exaggerated and absurd understanding of common attitudes towards young people. Notably, she begins by talking about children as "second class citizens," a term that from the start highlights the reality of the legal and political disempowerment of youth. Through an intersectional lens, we can also think about how this term also invites comparisons to the racist and sexist histories that have justified a curtailed approach to citizenship and rights, thereby drawing parallels between the plight of youth and the various political struggles of marginalized peoples. She follows this by discussing the tendency to view children as "a nuisance, something in the way." It is a phrase that casts children as objects—or "things"—and designates them as spatial disruption. Cuthand then proceeds to offer examples of infantilizing talk ("aren't you sweet!" and "I could eat you alive!"), clichéd statements understood as harmless, loving expressions that nonetheless carry with them their own power dynamic. Visually this sense of subjugation is captured by the low angle shot that lasts for the duration of the sequence. On the one hand this shot allows the viewer to inhabit the perspective of a child. However, given the context of Cuthand's statements, this shot also highlights how this sense of disempowerment is similarly entrenched in our visual language as the low angle itself is bound up in the expression of uneven power dynamics. Thus,

ultimately the video's humorous conceit of child-eating adults acts as a means of investigating the very real ways in which age allows for unequal and even predatory relationships.

Jumping in time, Cuthand leaves behind her childhood suspicion and describes instead her friendship with an older lesbian. In the sequence she appears with sparkling white Christmas lights wrapped tightly around her body. She proceeds to describe how this older lesbian “saw a space in my life, which she thought she could fill. She wanted to be the light of my life, my dreary little existence.” But Cuthand identifies that: “There was one problem, which was... well ... one major problem and that was that I wasn't in the dark” (*Working Baby Dyke Theory*). Like the first scene, this sequence tackles the unquestioned power dynamics at play in clichéd language. When she begins by describing the older lesbian's desire to fill a space in her life, the suggestion is that the woman saw emptiness in Cuthand's life. When observed through an intersectional lens, this desire to fill what is understood to be empty resonates as a very colonialist gesture. It echoes the notion of *Terra Nullius*—literally “nobody's land”—which served as political justification to exploit Indigenous lands. More than that, it suggests that Cuthand's subjectivity somehow requires validation by some outside power. This desire to validate Cuthand is also felt by the older lesbian's desire to be “the light of [her] life”—a phrase that carries with it a problematic power dynamic as expressed by colonialist imagery of light and dark. As Ella Shohat and Robert Stam outline, colonial discourse placed the colonizing power as a force of enlightenment—one that brought the light of “civilization” to the otherwise “dark” continents (140). Light therefore served as a symbol both for the colonial project and the progress myth that justified it. With the Christmas lights—which are notably white in colour—wrapped around her body and binding her hands behind her back, Cuthand hints at a hidden power dynamic, which may appear pleasant on a superficial level may in fact harbour much more sinister implications.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> I should note that Cuthand's identity as Indigenous is not explicitly foregrounded in this particular video. Nonetheless, I believe this video lends itself to postcolonial critique in the way that it describes certain colonial tropes, albeit through a discussion of youth.

Complementing this colonial invocation of light is the girlfriend's saviour complex. Cuthand remarks: "I think I was supposed to feel happy at this point and worship her like she was a God or something, something that was coming down to save me forever" (*Working Baby Dyke Theory*). As Cuthand describes this, a low angle shot reveals two gold cherubs dangling against a dark background. The language of worship along with the cherubs and Christmas lights in the previous shots recall the particularly Christian terms which have historically been used to justify both colonialism and abusive adult-child relationships.<sup>7</sup> Highlighting the Christian character that informs manifestations of uneven power along the dual dynamics of race and age allows Cuthand to identify Christianity as a conduit through which power is expressed and maintained. More than that, Cuthand's exploration of the politics of light and Christian saviour narratives serves to show how similar narratives reproduce themselves across different vectors like age and race. Thus, by employing an intersectional lens, it is possible to see the complicated ways in which Cuthand's subjectivity is informed by ageism and racism which operate not only in tandem but *through* each other. By using this colonial imagery to describe the older lesbian's condescending behaviour, *Working Baby Dyke Theory* is able to make a larger point about age as a vector of power and offer a more complex portrait of how power relations operate in concert with each other.

Cuthand, for her part, responds to the older lesbian by telling her "in no uncertain terms that she was no saviour of mine" (*Working Baby Dyke Theory*). As she does, the video cuts from a low angle shot to a head-on one, a move that embodies a shift from the older lesbian's perception of how Cuthand views her to how Cuthand actually views her. Cuthand's hand then appears from outside the frame and with a pair of scissors she swiftly cuts down both of the dangling cherubs. This rejection of the saviour narrative reveals Cuthand's agency and

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<sup>7</sup> In terms of the latter, one may look to various examples expressed in the Bible, including Proverbs 22:15 which declares "Foolishness is bound up in the heart of the child but the rod of correction shall drive it far from him" or Deuteronomy 21:18: "If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son which will not obey the voice of his mother, and that when they have chastened him will not harken unto them, then shall his father and his mother lay hold of him, and bring him out unto the gate of his place (...) and all of the men of the city shall stone him with stones that he die."

challenges the subordinate position left to her by the girlfriend. Thus, Cuthand's act of refusal serves to legitimize her own power and act as a counter-narrative to the colonial infused narrative that was forced upon her.



**“She was no saviour of mine.” DVD still.**

This pattern of colonial subjugation expressed through an intergenerational relationship repeats itself with the next “older dyke” she meets but along different terms. As Cuthand describes, “she had missed out on being a lesbian when she was a teenager and so she thought she could live vicariously through me. Well actually, she thought she could live vicariously through my pussy” (*Working Baby Dyke Theory*). The idea of living vicariously through someone offers yet another route for subjugation of young bodies. When Cuthand introduces this newest older lesbian, she represents her via a white plastic doll. Here again I think Cuthand invokes the legacy of colonialism but this time with an emphasis on sexual exploitation. Cuthand proceeds to describe “being locked in a room with only a bed” with the older lesbian, who is wearing no underwear (*Working Baby Dyke Theory*). At this point, we are shown a room consisting exclusively of the horizontal lines of blinds, the vertical lines of a radiator, and the pinstripe cover of the bed, the combination of which creates the impression of a kind of prison.

Given the emphasis on colonial tropes that I have thus far explored, I would argue this attempted rape points towards the extensive history of sexual exploitation of Indigenous peoples by white settlers. As Andrea Smith explains, the processes of sexual violence and colonialism are

“actually part of the same thing” and “it’s precisely through sexual violence that American Indian genocide is successful” (3). Moreover, the prison-like setup in which it takes place invokes the prevalence of institutionalized sexual violence towards Indigenous people. Compounding this is of course the factor of age, which creates another dynamic through which sexual exploitation is expressed. Here again it seems that the colonial logic of taking without permission is transposed onto the vector of age. Interestingly, Cuthand highlights this legacy of sexual exploitation while unsettling the same narrative through humour. Cuthand begins by informing the audience, “What follows is a very disturbing scene...” It is a phrase that has accompanied many a shocking exposé—the kind likely to be exploitative in its own way by creating a sensational narrative of victimization that leaves little room for that victim’s agency. But Cuthand’s story takes a turn when she continues by describing how she “dismantled one of the sex toy devices left in the room, presumably for our amusement, and used it to drill a hole through the wall. I then proceeded to escape from the room” (*Working Baby Dyke Theory*). Suddenly, Cuthand’s use of dark humour resurfaces and functions to disrupt what could otherwise become a more straightforward victimization narrative. I would argue this is significant because it allows Cuthand to both draw attention to the sexual exploitation of Aboriginal youth while also restoring power and agency to herself.

It is important that Cuthand do this in her own narrative since those around her wish to dictate a different story. Cuthand informs us, “I avoided her with a ten foot pole after that and when people noticed and began asking her about it, she said it was because I had been in love with her and she’d rejected me” (*Working Baby Dyke Theory*). A similar occurrence takes place after she starts to hang out with a “pack of older lesbians.” When Cuthand tires of feeling that she is their “toy, their pet, their mascot,” she leaves and the group maintains it was because she was nursing a broken heart from being in love with every single one of them. Drawing attention to the question of narratives and who gets to control them highlights another way in which power manifests. When viewed through a postcolonial lens, this attempt on the part of the older lesbian to control the narrative recalls a history of white settlers dictating a particular version of history that casts colonization as a triumphant and even inevitable endeavour that mostly excludes any

mention of Indigenous genocide. Instead, the traditional settler narrative suggests that Indigenous peoples merely receded into the past without offering much sense of why (Raheja 122).

Likewise, it draws attention to the way in which young voices are typically understood to lack authority and the veracity of their statements are constantly contested. Thus, the question of narratives is also a question of power—the power to narrate, the power to be heard, as well as the power to be *believed*. Using an intersectional lens, we can therefore think about how Cuthand offers an instructive example of how both young and Indigenous voices are excluded from being understood as legitimate sources of knowledge and truth.

In contrast, we can locate Cuthand's video as disrupting this established pattern to assert her own voice. In discussion with Cuthand about her typical videomaking process, she outlines that “mostly what I do [first] is I come up with a monologue usually. They've all been really monologue driven” (Interview). As with many of her other videos, *Working Baby Dyke Theory* very much depends on the authority of its narrator's voice to tell its story. To this extent, I am interested in how Cuthand's videomaking disrupts the kind of gendered setup in mainstream Hollywood cinema that Kaja Silverman identifies. Silverman “locate[s] the male voice at the point of apparent textual origin, while establishing the diegetic containment of the female voice” (45). In many ways, this argument reflects the previously discussed hierarchy wherein certain privileged voices hold more authority than others. In response to this gendered setup, Silverman argues “the female voice has enormous conceptual and discursive range once it is freed from its claustral confinement within the female body” (186). Thus, through the use of monologue, Cuthand is able to claim the voice she is otherwise denied.

As Cuthand describes this aftermath with the “pack of older lesbians”, she appears naked on her hands and knees with the white Christmas lights tied around her like a leash and a white blanket covering her that reads “Baby Dyke.” This instance of erotically charged S&M imagery seems to suggest that these erotic dynamics of the dominant and the submissive are hardly confined to the bedroom. It is clear in the scene that Cuthand is not a happy participant. Rather, the image implies that this submissive position is one that has been forced upon her. The video concludes with a close-up shot of Cuthand's hands tied behind her back as she wonders aloud,



“the next time an older dyke takes an interest in my life, will she ask for my consent before deciding what I need?” (*Working Baby Dyke Theory*). Ending on this issue of consent, the video provides a clear articulation of the issue that has been hovering throughout the course of the video by locating sexual exploitation within a broader discourse that disempowers youth and Indigenous people. To this extent, I would argue *Working Baby Dyke Theory* serves as an excellent example of child liberationist John Holt’s claim that “[u]nconsciously, we carry out the will of a society which holds a limited and demeaned view of children and which refuses to recognize their right to full humanity” (1). Cuthand’s spotlight on this denial of humanity and the different ways it manifests allows her work to offer a multidimensional critique of the iterations of uneven power. I think it is also important to think about how Cuthand’s narrative complicates stories of exploitation by emphasizing the role of lesbian women in perpetuating violent systemic power. I would argue this is a very important part of the video’s ability to complicate narratives related to power and identity. It allows Cuthand to engage with a more complex understanding of the lesbian experience and demonstrate how power functions *within* the lesbian community, reproducing systems of power along racist and ageist terms.<sup>8</sup>

Ultimately, I want to use *Working Baby Dyke Theory* in order to think about how disempowerment is enforced in differing but complementary contexts. In doing so, I do not wish to erase the important differences that distinguish racism from ageism etc. However, I do wish to emphasize correlations and parallels because I believe doing so offers a productive framework for thinking about how power reproduces itself across different vectors. Identifying the recurring narratives that reinforce these imbalances of power I believe is essential to the mutual dismantling of such systems. If power asserts itself in intersectional ways then I would argue it is imperative to attack power along similarly intersectional lines. As I demonstrate in the rest of this chapter, thinking about the relationships between racism, homophobia, ageism, etc. opens up

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<sup>8</sup>Although the term “ageist” is more commonly employed to refer to the opposite dynamic in which disempowerment is experienced by older people, I have decided to use it here precisely because I understand ageism as operating along different but congruent lines.

productive opportunities for thinking about the complex workings of power and how Cuthand's interventions in disrupting hegemonic narratives function as points of rupture.



**“Their toy, their pet, their mascot.” DVD still.**

***Depression/Oppression: an intersectional approach to mental illness in *Anhedonia****

Having established the ways in which power operates across different vectors of identity, I want to continue to explore these complicated dynamics this time by focusing on the matter of mental illness to press questions of agency, accountability and the entangled nature of power. Produced in 2001, *Anhedonia* is a work still very much produced by someone inhabiting a youthful perspective. But as a more experienced artist, she is able to play with form in different ways as we see her mixing 16mm filmmaking with digital video. The result is a work that uses film to express an oftentimes intimate, albeit hazy and elusive, perspective while the digital offers flexibility to at times disrupt, explicate and coalesce images. The title, *Anhedonia*, refers to the medical term for the inability to feel pleasure and the work serves as a vehicle for Cuthand to explore her life with mental illness. Acting as a confessional essay, *Anhedonia* details Cuthand's own experiences, the reactions of others towards her mental illness, the resulting loss of intimacy (sexual and otherwise) and the stigma that disempowers her.

The video starts with the disarmingly cheerful verse from the Irving Berlin song *Cheek to Cheek*: “Heaven, I’m in heaven...” As the song plays, the audience is witness to different vignettes of an apartment presumably belonging to Cuthand: an image of a dripping tap, an alarm clock, books stacked on the floor, an anxious hamster in a cage and the remains of a microwave dinner. Seen by themselves these images could easily introduce the apartment of many a young person, but when Cuthand’s voiceover cuts in, the images take on new meaning. She tells us: “This was going to be the song that I would put on my answering machine if I ever killed myself. You know, as one of those clear moments in an otherwise unclear state of mind” (*Anhedonia*). Suddenly the inconsequential vignettes become portraits of the small ways in which the effects of depression can manifest in the home. This opening sequence exemplifies the kind of frank and disarmingly honest tone that Cuthand adopts throughout the piece as well as the dark brand of humour that sometimes fuels her observations. If I have already demonstrated how Cuthand’s work offers helpful accounts for thinking through the lived experience of racism and ageism, I hope to also show how these and other expressions of power produce or impact upon another axis of identity: mental illness.

At the heart of many debates around mental illness is the question of nature versus nurture. To what extent is mental illness biologically determined and how much depends on our environment—the sum of our social, political and cultural contexts? For her part, Cuthand acknowledges the medical narrative that informs her own understanding of mental illness (she wonders: “This sickness—neurotransmitters so small—how can they affect you so much?”) but is ultimately more keen to emphasize the social conditions that spur this “sickness” and its stigma (*Anhedonia*). In one sequence, the camera focuses in on her feet as she traverses rocks in slow motion while a cacophony of disembodied voices attempt to offer their own interpretation of her illness. The voices say things like: “Why don’t you take more responsibility for your life?”; “Why are you taking medication? Don’t you know that’s bad?” and “You’re just lazy. Get the hell out of bed” (*Anhedonia*). These voices, which repeat themselves at least a couple of times, offer clear examples of the kind of reductive logic used towards sufferers of mental illness and also how the burden of responsibility is placed on the individual. In his examination of how

mental distress is framed by contemporary media, Stephen Harper suggests discussions obscure “both its social origins in class, gender or racial oppression and the possibility of preventing it or mitigating it through radical social transformation” (15). I am also interested in the way that these criticisms are framed and what they imply about labour, class and race. For example, criticisms of laziness and a lack of responsibility for oneself echo the kind of derogatory remarks used to blame people of colour (including Indigenous peoples) and the lower/working classes for their own poverty. This thereby serves the function of drawing criticism away from the social and economic structures that produce such inequality. Once again, we are faced with an example of how power expresses itself through repetitive narratives and how these modes work across different axes of identity to reinforce borders of power. This time though I think the use of these offensive clichés plays an additional role of hinting at the fact that the same forces that spur poverty amongst the working classes and Aboriginal communities also play a role in producing the conditions conducive to mental illness.<sup>9</sup> Cuthand’s response to all of these critical voices appears via text on the screen: “Your ignorance kills me.” Opting for a written response that stands in contrast to the noise of voices, Cuthand’s reply is blunt in its message and sharp in its indictment. With its use of the second person, her response addresses not only the chorus of ignorant opinions but also potential viewers who may (or may not) also be guilty of participating in these disempowering behaviours.

This decision to locate responsibility outside of the individual is also expressed near the video’s end when Cuthand informs us, “I know I’ll have moments of [living a normal life]—when my meds are working, when I’m allowed to take care of myself” (*Anhedonia*). The idea

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<sup>9</sup> Though I think it is worth highlighting that Cuthand also observes a different kind of derogatory remark when one of the voices suggests her use of medication is bad. In many ways this reflects the other side of the political spectrum, representing the perspective of somebody perhaps concerned by “Big Pharma” (though the vagueness of the phrase “bad for you” insists upon a variety of interpretations) and ignorant of the way that this concern infantilizes Cuthand’s decision-making capacity to look after her own body. In this way, the infantilizing narrative discussed in the previous section re-emerges in this instance to disempower a sufferer of mental illness.

that Cuthand needs to be “allowed” to take care of herself suggests the presence of external factors at play that infringe on her ability to do just that. In placing responsibility beyond the sufferer, Cuthand disrupts the tendency towards victim-blaming that dominates much of the discourse on mental illness—along with racism and poverty.



**Mental illness as overwhelming force in *Anhedonia*. DVD still.**

In tracking this question of power and agency, I want to look at how Cuthand’s mental state is represented in the film and how this speaks to the question of “personal responsibility.” In a particularly striking shot appearing after the opening vignettes, we see Cuthand’s body lying on the floor covered only by a comforter and illuminated by a small spotlight of light while darkness encircles her entirely. The way in which the darkness dominates the shot in addition to the way that the film’s image drags, leaving behind a double impression, positions Cuthand’s body in such a way that her body occupies an uncertain space and seems on the verge of sinking into total darkness. Similarly, in another shot we see a close-up of Cuthand’s face underwater with only her nose and mouth hovering above the surface before she sinks further down. Both shots convey the sense of a mental state consistently at the border of destruction. This feeling is echoed by large portions of the soundtrack in which haunting industrial-sounding echoes create the impression of a world on the verge of collapse. The result is that mental illness is painted in the work as a powerful force that Cuthand must persistently fight against or be destroyed by. And by

depicting mental illness as this overwhelming force, *Anhedonia* highlights the absurdity of dismissing those who suffer from mental illness as merely irresponsible.

Cuthand also considers the impact of her mental illness in the way that she expresses her sexuality. In this case, I understand sexuality not merely as sexual preference but as the lived experience of expressed and unexpressed desire, *eros* and sexual activity. In the shot, we see Cuthand facing forward, licking a glass pane covered in orange. The first time we see the shot, it runs in reverse so that with every lick Cuthand hides more of herself. Meanwhile, in the voice-over she confesses, “I really feel like my depression has kept me locked inside a lot of my life. For some reason, what makes me feel the worst is not having sex” (*Anhedonia*). Then in the next shot we see her holding up a white sheet with her teeth in a triangle formation as a shot of two women having sex plays out over top. Cuthand’s voice-over continues: “Sometimes I feel like the only kind of sex I could have is casual. Not because I want that kind. (...) I’ve been in love and I’ve lost it, and I’ve been in love again, and I lost it again. The ends were always when my illness would come back” (*Anhedonia*).

I am interested in this sequence in part for the affective way that it captures her experience in addition to the way that it speaks to the dynamic way mental illness affects and is affected by sexuality. The erotically charged image of Cuthand licking the glass on the one hand demonstrates the desire for sexual intimacy but the reversal of the image means that this licking ends up becoming a claustrophobic act of containment, rather than pleasure. Then in the following shot we see these unrequited desires being pressed on top of her own image, solidifying this disjuncture between what she has and what she wants. In this way, Cuthand is able to document how her mental illness affects her by limiting the expression of her sexual desire. The reasoning behind this is then explored when Cuthand highlights that it was the end of relationships that would trigger her illness. In highlighting this aspect, Cuthand demonstrates the reciprocal way that mental illness interacts with other facets of identity, in this case sexuality. Thus, with an intersectional lens we can observe that in Cuthand’s work mental illness not only impacts upon her ability to express her sexuality as she would like but it is also her sexuality that impacts upon her mental illness. I would argue that it is the interconnected way that these factors

operate and indeed impact each other that illustrates the significance of considering these axes via an intersectional lens.



**“What makes me feel the worst is not having sex.” DVD still.**

Cuthand’s most explicit criticisms of the systemic factors that impact mental illness appear in a gameshow-styled sequence that occurs shortly after the aforementioned sequences and interrupts Cuthand’s monologue. This sequence consists of brightly coloured text and a soundtrack reminiscent of a 1970s gameshow, which creates a stark break in tone. But much like the opening of the video, this tone is only falsely upbeat and a dark sense of humour is deployed to highlight the absurdity of the “personal responsibility” narrative. The text reads: “Fun with statistics!” and then proceeds to inform us that “Queer youth make up 30% of all youth suicides”; “33% of suicides are First Nations People” and “15% of people suffering from depression will die by their own hand” (*Anhedonia*). As each statistic appears a series of obviously fake gasps and groans plays over the soundtrack, mimicking the kind of staged tension gameshows create with their studio audience. Then lastly, the word “Depression” appears on screen, but the word’s first two letters begin flickering like a lottery until the screen reads “Oppression” (*Anhedonia*). This sequence perhaps most blatantly points to the larger social factors at play. And while it may be blunt in its messaging, in doing this, *Anhedonia* eschews the more dominant narrative of sufferers of mental illness as individuals coping with a disease that affects them on an individual basis. Instead, Cuthand locates mental illness within existing power structures expressed through race, age and sexuality. I would argue that the sequence’s falsely playful tone mocks a commonly

perceived unwillingness or resistance to engaging with information that is difficult or challenging. In adopting the style of a gameshow, Cuthand offers a falsely fun means for the sharing of important statistical information. I say falsely because I do not think that the colourful text or bounding soundtrack make the information any easier to take in. In fact, the disjuncture between form and content in this sequence makes it all the more uncomfortable. In effect, Cuthand seems intent on sabotaging the otherwise vapid form of the gameshow, which typically depends on only a shallow kind of knowledge, and injecting it with information that disrupts its otherwise complacent flow. In addition, the lottery quality of the Depression/Oppression shot brings to the fore the notion of chance, a term I employ in opposition to the neoliberal understanding of merit. Whereas the dominant neoliberal narrative places the burden on the individual to take responsibility for his or her own mental health, the notion of chance and the lottery suggest that a person's mental health is subject to forces outside their control and in many ways it is the lottery of birth—which sexuality, race and class they are born into—that will inform their experiences with mental illness.

This leads me to the heart of why I chose to pursue the question of mental illness in my examination of intersectionality. In part, it would be strange not to since several of Cuthand's videos detail or at least refer to her experiences with mental illness. However, more important than its ubiquity, the matter of mental illness demonstrates how imbalances of power expressed across different axes may possess a generative capacity. In this way, different axes of identity not only impact upon each other but also *produce* each other. Thus, Cuthand's focus on the ways in which mental illness is produced by racism, homophobia and ageism demonstrates to what extent such factors hold power. This is not intended as a means of diminishing Cuthand's own agency but rather as an attempt to demonstrate how *Anhedonia* redistributes accountability such that the individual is no longer the bearer of responsibility for forces and systems much larger than him or her. Therefore, I would argue *Anhedonia* exemplifies the importance of considering power from an intersectional perspective in so far as it shows how axes of identity are entangled in each other's creation, which in turn reveals the power they hold over different communities.



### **“We can’t say no”: Power problematized in *Untouchable***

As I near the conclusion of my intersectional investigation of power in Cuthand’s work, I want to use *Untouchable* to return to the topic of intergenerational relationships to think about the kinds of narratives that justify uneven power relations. Produced with a Hi-8 video camera, *Untouchable* takes the form of confessional essay in which a young Cuthand reflects on her desire for older lesbians and the kind of relationships she experiences with them. *Untouchable* was produced in 1998 with the help of Video In and the Emily Carr University of Art Design, where she was enrolled at the time. In the video, Cuthand examines relationships that hover ambiguously between the platonic and the romantic, and it is this ambiguity that spurs Cuthand’s consideration of her own desire in the midst of the expressions of power that seek to variously structure, control and engage with this desire. This reflection is spurred by her acquaintance with a man who tells Cuthand he is a pedophile, that he “likes teenage boys” (*Untouchable*). In the video, Cuthand recounts riding around with the man, who describes his own unrequited longing while Cuthand considers her own desire for older women. Approaching the question of pedophilia is never an easy task, especially if one is to avoid the kind of overly simplistic narratives that dominate such discussions and end up disempowering the youth they are meant to be protecting. But as I will examine, Cuthand’s story offers a nuanced portrait of intergenerational relationships that explores exploitation while also placing youth in a position of agency over their own desire. Of course with an intersectional lens, I will also be concerned with how *Untouchable*’s exploration of intergenerational relationships serves to comment on much more than age.

I begin by first addressing the formal texture of the video and how this functions to position desire as confusing terrain through which to navigate. While the video begins with a brief close-up of a classical Hollywood kiss on the television, this quickly cuts to a shot of a prowling cat then to an image of Cuthand’s back looking out alone on a porch then to disorienting P.O.V. shots of driving in a car at night as she describes a desire “knitting itself in my cunt” (*Untouchable*). This quick series of seemingly disconnected shots disrupts any

assumption that this exploration of intergenerational desire will follow the linear path already well worn by myriad of hegemonic morality narratives. The video quality in accordance with Cuthand's frequent preference for close-ups adds to this uncertain quality, giving the impression of a continually shifting landscape. By setting up this sense of uncertainty on a formal level, Cuthand is therefore able to establish that her exploration of intergenerational relationships will follow a similarly non-didactic path.

The video then proceeds to outline the kind of limited narratives that stand in contrast to Cuthand's own approach and which define her desire as "wrong, so very wrong" (*Untouchable*). In one scene, we see her in a striped pastel blue dress sitting under a tree with her thumb placed coyly in her mouth. This is followed by a shot in which she runs towards an ice cream truck and begins jumping up and down. Invoking a kind of paternalistic viewpoint, Cuthand declares: "At best, I am a naive, foolish little girl with misguided crushes" (*Untouchable*). Here Cuthand's humour highlights the absurdity of viewing adolescents as young children. The second shot—the grown body of Cuthand jumping up and down like a five year old—is humorous precisely because Cuthand is hardly the little girl the paternalistic viewpoint imagines. The first shot meanwhile points to the hypocrisy of contemporary Western society's expressed hatred of pedophilia but its obsession with fetishized images of youth. The thumb in the mouth and the way she sits in her short dress recall the infantilizing visual language used to regularly eroticize women. Thinking about these images from an intersectional perspective, I think it is also worth considering how the images of sexualized and "innocent" youth recall the kind of imagery used to define and confine Indigenous bodies. Caught between the dichotomy of the savage and the innocent, the figural "Indian" has little agency in the context of colonial discourse. This has similarly been reflected in the history of Hollywood's representation of Native American women, which are typically stuck within the dichotomy of the helpless "celluloid princess" or the destructive "sexualized maiden" (Marubbio). Cuthand proceeds to embody the latter image in the following sequence as she is seen wearing a tight plastic dress, holding a knife that she aggressively licks in one hand and carrying a small balloon in the other with the words "Thinking of You" written across its surface. Cuthand's voice-over meanwhile informs us, "At my worst, I

am the psycho-sexual stalker ready to plunge you into a hellish vortex of warped desires because there's nothing more frightening than a teenage girl with a hard clit" (*Untouchable*).



**"There's nothing more frightening than a teenage girl with a hard clit." DVD still.**

In playing into this image of threatening and "excessive" sexuality, Cuthand parodies the figure of the sexualized maiden, a colonial image that remains very much present in contemporary popular culture (see the continued appropriation of Indigenous culture as sexual fantasy in many a fashion magazine, runway trend and Halloween costume). Adding to this is the fact that Cuthand's image of aggressive sexuality is a specifically queer one, a fact that adds an additional layer of "threat." Thus, according to the logic of hegemonic discourse, Cuthand's desire is already defined by these two poles, which allow for little nuance or the expression of her own agency. In this way, I think Cuthand's "dangerous" desire—her longing for older women—occurs within an existing context whereby her desire is already understood as naive and dangerous.

Parroting the former opinion, Cuthand's monologue informs us "I'm naive because I'm looking to be exploited. Because that's what happens to younger partners because we can't say no, because it's always no, because someone else owns our bodies including our cunts and cocks" (*Untouchable*). Visually we are met with a naked Cuthand. The camera pans from her breasts down to her vulva where a lock is securely fastened. While it is an image that may depend on a fairly obvious metaphor, it is nonetheless provocative. In conversation with Cuthand, she attested to the fact that this scene in particular prompted a call to police authorities

because someone involved in the gallery where the video was being shown was worried it qualified as child porn (Interview). Although the matter was eventually dropped, this viewer's response to the thought of seeing underage nudity points to the way the video positions Cuthand's age in an ambiguous place. She talks about being a teenager but beyond that no specific age is given, which places the audience in the uncertain position of witnessing what can apparently be mistaken for "underage pornography." In person, Cuthand clarifies that ultimately nothing became of the incident because she was not underage (Interview). Nonetheless, I think the incident usefully demonstrates a point that Cuthand herself identifies in the sequence. By this, I refer in particular to Cuthand's assertion that "we can't say no." This line I think succinctly outlines the problem with protective attitudes frequently employed towards young, sexual people. More specifically, I believe that in attempting to protect them, these attitudes run into the problem of denying young people agency and authority over their own bodies by prescribing the terms of their desire. Thus, by dictating the "acceptable" terms of their sexuality, the state ends up discouraging the capacity for youth to make their own decisions and exercise authority over their own bodies. Therefore, this act of "protection" serves to ultimately undermine the bodily autonomy of young people by contributing to a culture in which their authority is not respected.

Although it is certainly outside the jurisdiction of this thesis to make any kind of sophisticated legal argument on the topic, my intention is to point to how a general attitude of "protection" that is very frequently directed at youth and oftentimes reflected in laws may paradoxically contribute to the endangerment of young people. Thus, I argue that by approaching youth from a perspective of protection rather than empowerment, the state functions within a culture that generally does not respect youth as autonomous subjects. As psychologist and child liberationist Richard Farson maintains:

What children really need is the option to refuse. The freedom not to engage in sexual activity is as important as any other aspect of sexual freedom. But children are raised in such a way that they cannot refuse adults. Parents have insisted that children accept all forms of affection from relatives and friends—being picked up,

fondled, hugged, kissed, pinched, tickled, squeezed—leaving children with little experience in saying no. (147)

This attitude of protection of course exists within a particular historical and social context. As Thomas Waugh describes, despite a surge of child liberationist critiques in the 1960s and 70s: “the right to be free quickly transformed, in legal and cultural practices, to a right to be protected, a right to be educated, a right, essentially, to the paternalistic control of the state and family” (142).

This disempowerment of youth acquires additional meaning when one considers how narratives of infantilization have historically been employed towards Indigenous populations. As Julie Passanante Elman observes, “using overlapping rhetorics of race, disability, and age, eugenic thinkers established Western culture as the pinnacle of development, capacity and efficiency in opposition to other non-Western cultures, which were deemed less developed, more ‘infantile’ or ‘primitive’ by comparison” (10). In this way, such infantilizing narratives manage to both entrench notions of white supremacy while also disempowering younger people by imagining them as either incompetent or idealized innocent subjects. Using intersectionality to think about this double gesture is important here because it allows us to consider how power operates along both axes and how these dynamics mutually constitute each other. Ultimately, Cuthand is able to disrupt this paternalistic fantasy of protection, when she instead asserts “I can say no” (*Untouchable*). In doing so, she returns agency to herself and offers an example of what an empowered approach to youth and their sexuality might look like.

Cuthand perhaps most explicitly takes on systemic forms of ageism in a subsequent sequence in which she is seen walking down a path from one side of the shot to the other with a bouquet in hand. Meanwhile, her voiceover proclaims, “Deconstructing a hierarchy of age in a sick society where if I am under eighteen I am still a child, where I have no human rights until that point, where children are possessions, where we are to be seen and not heard, is such a daunting task to accomplish on the first date and really almost not worth the trouble” (*Untouchable*). At this point, Cuthand throws the bouquet away and walks herself off-screen. I find this sequence particularly interesting in the way that it clearly positions the exploitative

nature of intergenerational relationships within a larger and more complicated dynamic of power exercised over youth. In doing so, she points to a problem much more widespread than pedophilia and much larger than any legal framework could easily address. The fact that she chooses to highlight this larger question of disempowerment by concentrating on her own personal relationships is revealing of the ways that personal is political for Cuthand. In interview, she argues that “those [systemic] problems usually are interpersonal. When you’re being oppressed—it’s not just a system—there’s people actively promoting the system that get in your way or keep you down” (Interview). Anchoring her exploration in the personal therefore serves political ends, allowing her to highlight the kind of narratives that justify the systemic disempowerment of youth.

Cuthand ends *Untouchable* with the image of her feet nervously hugging the edges of a narrow curb she attempts to walk. She observes, “I tread carefully and wait to finally be considered old enough. I wait to finally be considered.” I think this final declaration usefully expresses what is at stake in these intergenerational exchanges. With her sentence structuring, Cuthand crafts a parallel between the desire to be considered “old enough” and the desire to be considered at all. I think it therefore highlights the issue of subjectivity (who is a person and who gets to count?) and how the answers to these questions are impacted by factors of age but we may also add race, class, sexuality, etc. While I have previously outlined ways in which Cuthand asserts her agency in this video (“I can say no”), in this final sequence Cuthand shifts the focus to the need for others to consider her. This final desire is therefore outside of her control but instead may be usefully seen as an invitation to the viewer. This desire to “be considered” is one I will return to in the second chapter but for now I want to emphasize an intersectional interpretation of this phrase. Thus, Cuthand waits to be considered, and therefore respected, as a youth, an Aboriginal, and a lesbian all at once.

Given the ways in which Cuthand’s criticisms resonate along intersectional lines, I would argue that Cuthand’s work ultimately encourages us to think about the way that uneven power dynamics are justified and preserved through narratives of protection or helping. This desire to act as saviour—whether it is expressed by the white colonial power towards Indigenous peoples

or by an older person imposing their authority on a younger subject or by the state attempting to protect “vulnerable” youth—presents a problematic dynamic in so far as it works to disempower individuals and groups it purports to aid. Instead, it functions as a means of control and as a means to exercise power under seemingly benevolent terms. Ultimately, *Untouchable* serves as a helpful example for thinking about power as a force that is expressed across intersectional lines where each iteration—regardless of its “good intentions”—functions as a means of disempowerment and domination.

### **In Summary**

Ultimately, I have used Cuthand’s work to consider some of the ways in which intersectionality may serve to highlight power as it is expressed across different axes of identity. While Cuthand’s work offers only specific and individualized accounts of the lived experience of identity, I believe that focusing on her particular perspective has permitted me to ground my examination in observations that do not attempt to be objective. Rather I have embraced her subjective narratives as fruitful examples with which to feel through ideas related to power and identity.

Through this process, I have demonstrated the importance of looking at relationships between race, sexuality, age, mental illness, etc. Certainly this is not a complete list and my own examination hardly represents an exhaustive account of different identity factors at work in the videos I have discussed. Thus, I have chosen to emphasize certain vectors over others, and this has included emphasizing two often overlooked factors: age and mental illness. In pursuing this line of investigation, I have highlighted the ways in which certain narratives repeat themselves across different vectors of identity. These include infantilization and saviour narratives, which function to justify the assertion of power under the seemingly benevolent cloak of “helping”. In demonstrating how these narratives repeat themselves across different axes, I do not wish to suggest that these narratives operate identically or that power is expressed evenly across different factors. Instead, I have suggested that recognizing these narratives and the way in which they cut

across intersectional lines of identity is important in thinking about opportunities for the mutual unravelling of power systems. In terms of the latter, I have offered some examples of what this may look like by examining some of the small ways in which Cuthand is able to disrupt the narratives that variously seek to confine her as helpless, naive and/or lazy. I believe that doing so has provided the groundwork for my subsequent investigations of resistance and visual sovereignty to be explored in the next chapter.

Therefore, I hope to have offered some examples of the kind of work intersectionality can perform in a film and media context. While I do believe that focused examinations of factors like gender, race and sexuality in film and media will continue to offer a more complicated portrait of the workings of power, I maintain that a push towards intersectional approaches that more fully engage with a variety of identity axes will be essential to offering a more complicated understanding of both identity and power. Ultimately, I propose not the abandonment of specificity but rather to think about these specific manifestations of power—through age, through sexuality, through race, etc.—in chorus with each other.



## **Chapter Two:**

### **Rethinking Resistance:**

#### **Visual Sovereignty in *Love & Numbers*, *Colonization: the Second Coming* and *Boi Oh Boi***

#### **Power and Resistance**

I begin my discussion of resistance in Cuthand's work with Michel Foucault, who suggests that "where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (*History of Sexuality* 95). I start my discussion with Foucault not as an endorsement of his argument but rather to point towards some of the ways that resistance has been conceptualized and the challenges such approaches pose. According to Foucault's understanding, power and resistance are bound together in a kind of symbiotic relationship. On the one hand, this implies that power is never absolute because resistance is always present where power is exercised. However, it also suggests that resistance cannot be thought of outside of power. Theorizing resistance along these terms lends itself therefore to understanding resistance always as an act of opposition against the dominating power. My own intention in discussing resistance is not so much to argue whether or not it is possible to exist outside of power but rather to think about how resistance need not be considered according to these strictly oppositional terms. Instead, I will use this chapter to explore resistance both as a reactive and generative force. Exploring the latter will allow me to refocus resistance and complicate its understanding within a specifically Indigenous framework to think about it as an act of social-cultural production, growth and regeneration. Following the pattern established in the previous chapter, I will begin by first examining how resistance is frequently conceptualized and proceed to offer my own interpretation of how to discuss it. This will then lead me to ground my examination of resistance in the specifics of three of Cuthand's videos: *Love & Numbers* (2004), *Colonization: the Second Coming* (1996), and *Boi Oh Boi* (2012).

Part of my reasoning for talking about resistance is that it is a term frequently brought up in contemporary discussions of power by writers who often fail to clarify what they mean by the

term. In their exploration of the concept, Jocelyn A. Hollander and Rachel L. Einwohner identify that “many writers seem to invoke the concept of resistance in their titles or introductions but then fail to define it or to use it in any systemic way” (534). Beginning with this observation, I want to proceed not by offering any kind of definitive understanding of resistance, but rather to offer a particular interpretation of resistance that is grounded in a specific Indigenous perspective that I believe serves to destabilize notions of a self/Other binary. Doing so, I believe will counter many common understandings and uses of resistance. Hollander and Einwohner observe in their exploration of the different ways that “resistance” is used by academics that an element “common to nearly all uses is a sense of opposition” (538).<sup>10</sup> This may seem like an obvious enough point, however I believe it also points to some of the main problems one can run into when engaging with the topic of resistance. At what point does pursuing a discussion of resistance along such oppositional lines serve to reinforce existing power structures? To this extent, I would argue that by consistently articulating the actions of the resisting party in relation to the actions of the powerful, one can inadvertently end up reproducing a self/Other dichotomy.

My understanding of the self/Other binary as it relates to film studies derives from the work of Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto. In “The Difficulty of Being Radical: The Discipline of Film Studies and the Postcolonial World Order,” Yoshimoto looks at national cinema scholarship and specifically scholarship of non-Western cinemas. In his analysis, he observes a fundamental problem in the way that film scholarship approaches these cinemas as “the Other”. As he notes: “Imperialism starts to show its effect not when it domesticates the Other but the moment it posits the difference of the Other against the identity of the self. This fundamental imperialism of the self/Other dichotomy can never be corrected by the hermeneutics of the Other or cross-cultural exchange” (Yoshimoto 257). Yoshimoto’s own understanding of the self/Other binary borrows from the work of postcolonial cultural theorist Homi Bhabha. In *The Location of Culture* Bhabha suggests that “the Other text is forever the exegetical horizon of difference, never the active agent of articulation” (124). In this way, I would argue that approaches to resistance that

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<sup>10</sup> It should be noted that Hollander and Einwohner focus on sociology but from my observance many of their arguments translate well and resonate within a film and media context.

exclusively posit it as an oppositional gesture end up playing into a similar imperialist dynamic. In contrast, I want to offer an approach that articulates resistance as an act that *may* adopt a directly oppositional quality. After all, it is not my intention to ignore the very real dynamics of power at work that may cause a resisting actor to adopt an actively oppositional stance. But I also want to conceive of resistance as an act that can also be understood primarily as *generative* and one that exists on its own terms. In doing so, I also want to build on the previous chapter in order to think about how this notion of resistance may be complicated by an intersectional approach to questions of identity and power.

### **Visual Sovereignty as Resistance**

In order to pursue this alternative conception of resistance, I look to the work of Michelle H. Raheja and her concept of visual sovereignty. While I have already described to some extent what visual sovereignty is and the kind of work I envision it performing in the introduction of this thesis, I want to elaborate and go into greater detail about its function, purpose and the possibilities it affords. Raheja discusses visual sovereignty as an act that: “simultaneously addresses the settler population by creating self-representations that interact with older stereotypes but also, more importantly, connects film production to larger aesthetic practices that work toward strengthening treaty claims and more traditional (although by no means static) modes of cultural understanding” (19). To this extent, I am interested in visual sovereignty because of the way that it accommodates different modes of resistance. Thus, when Raheja talks about how visual sovereignty interacts with older stereotypes I understand this as operating along an oppositional vector. Meanwhile, visual sovereignty’s capacity to strengthen treaty claims and modes of cultural understanding is generative and locates resistance within the ability to produce and reproduce one’s culture.

In order to expand on this idea, I want to take some time to locate visual sovereignty within a host of contemporary examples of Indigenous thinkers who have looked to the realm of the cultural and the visual as a site of productive contestation. For example, we may look to

Maori filmmaker Barry Barclay's notion of Fourth Cinema. Barclay describes Fourth Cinema as a project in which Indigenous filmmakers "may seek to rework the ancient core values to shape a growing Indigenous cinema outside the national orthodoxy" (11). Thus, Fourth Cinema is concerned with looking outside the confines of "national" cinemas and to instead connect disparate Indigenous cinemas across the globe. In eschewing these national boundaries, Fourth Cinema disrupts Western geographical understandings that render invisible Indigenous nations by subsuming them under their colonial names. This allows these Indigenous cinemas to therefore both pose a challenge to colonial geographies and generate solidarity amongst Indigenous nations.

Meanwhile, visual sovereignty can also be examined in relation to the work of Jolene Rickard, who theorized alternative modes for understanding sovereignty in her 1995 essay "Sovereignty: A Line in the Sand." Raheja's work directly cites Rickard's work as influential in the way that Rickard seeks to expand understandings of sovereignty (194). Rickard argues that "[t]he work of Indigenous artists needs to be understood through the clarifying lens of sovereignty and self-determination, not just in terms of assimilation, colonization and identity politics. (...) Sovereignty is the border that shifts Indigenous experience from a victimized stance to a strategic one" (117).

Along these lines, I think it is helpful to zero in on the value of using the word "sovereignty" to talk about resistance in Indigenous media making. In part, it is valuable precisely because it locates resistance within a specifically Indigenous context. Therefore it serves to destabilize Western-centered approaches to talking about resistance and distinguishes Indigenous resistance from different forms. Raheja argues that sovereignty in general is "perhaps the most important, overused, and often-misunderstood term employed in late twentieth century and early twenty-first-century Native American circles" (197). Raheja's particular understanding of sovereignty locates it "within traditional North American aesthetic production prior to European incursion" in order to "discursively distinguish [Native Americans] from the other human, spirit, animal, and inanimate communities" (198). From this perspective, Raheja views contemporary sovereignty as consisting of both Indigenous and European genealogies (198).

With this in mind, I would like to think about how sovereignty and by extension visual sovereignty are caught up in these conflicting discourses. The Indigenous struggle for sovereignty points to the impulse towards control, whether it is control over their own communities, resources or, as this particular thesis is concerned with, the images and representations that make up their cultural landscape. To this extent, I understand Indigenous sovereignty as embodying both these oppositional and generative modes: oppositional in so far as Indigenous peoples are continually compelled to struggle to assert sovereignty and generative in its insistence on exercising self-determination.

I view Raheja's concept of visual sovereignty as an Indigenous articulation of the importance of representation and specifically self-representation. One can look to Cuthand to explain just why this matters so much. She describes how "I just didn't see too many young, biracial dykes on TV" (qtd. in Eisner 401). In interview, Cuthand even mentioned that it was not until she read a magazine article about being a young lesbian that she realized being both young and a lesbian was even possible (Interview). Though just one example, I think it offers a very clear articulation of how the media functions to authenticate certain identities and personal narratives. With regard to the impact of the visual, Amelia Jones argues that "[w]e don't know how to exist anymore without imagining ourselves as a picture" (*Self/Image* xvii). She continues: "We continually make and grasp and view imagery as if to complete our pictures of ourselves" (*Self/Image* xvii). The role of the visual in shaping how we understand others and ourselves demonstrates the importance of theorizing the visual as an important arena in which to assert sovereignty.

The significance of the visual for Indigenous peoples occurs within a specific history wherein images—and specifically the moving image—have had a very contentious relationship with Indigenous culture. As Wendy Gay Pearson and Susan Knabe note, "very shortly after the motion picture camera was invented, along with the technology to process film and to screen the results before audiences, Indigenous peoples all over the world suddenly found themselves in front of the lens, their lives and cultures subject to the camera's apparently indexical relationship to the truth" (3). This early exposure to the power of the cinematic lens soon proliferated as the

figure of the “Indian” became ubiquitous in Hollywood cinema during the first half of the twentieth century. Paradoxically, this ubiquitous image of the figural Indian functioned to not only exoticize and (frequently) demonize Native American peoples but also to render them invisible.<sup>11</sup> By confining the Indian to the annals of the past, Hollywood cinema erases the contemporary realities of Native Americans, making them “safe” within a settler-colonial context. As Shohat and Stam argue, this paradoxical absence and presence of Native Americans in early Hollywood meant “living Indians were introduced to ‘play dead’” (119). From a contemporary perspective, representations of Native Americans are few and far between. According to a Screen Actors Guild report from 2009, Native Americans make up only 0.3% of all roles in American film and television (Raheja 61).

Despite, or perhaps in response to, this absence, Native Americans took it upon themselves to use film as a medium with which to express themselves and document their own communities. In other words, Raheja suggests that because “film became the mode through which most people in the world encountered Native North American communities (and mostly still do) (...) subsequently, film has also become a technology of the self through which Native Americans themselves have structured their identities” (157). Randolph Lewis discusses this idea as the “cinema of sovereignty”, a term that Raheja’s visual sovereignty borrows from. Lewis uses cinema of sovereignty to talk about the emergence of documentaries by Indigenous filmmakers such as Alanis Obomsawin. Raheja builds on this idea but orients it away from being strictly focused on cinema. Thus, Raheja discusses cinema but also emphasizes virtual and new media as an arena in which Native Americans have been able to tell their own stories and represent their own identities. In doing so, Raheja is able to assert a vision of sovereignty that encompasses a wide range of possibilities for Indigenous people to assert agency. From this perspective,

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<sup>11</sup> I want to specify Native Americans here because of the historical dominance of Hollywood in framing popular images of Indigenous peoples was largely focused on the North American continent. Popular representations of other Indigenous peoples possess their own complicated relationships with popular images and my intention is not to ignore them but rather to confine my discussion to a North American context that better speaks to Cuthand’s positioning.

Indigenous people emerge not merely as victims of history but as agents capable of responding and creating their own cultural legacy. Thus, she suggests:

Transnational Indigenous media production rethinks Audre Lorde's dictum that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" by insisting that the very foundations on which the master's house is built are Indigenous and should be reterritorialized or repatriated. Moreover, Indigenous filmmakers working within the framework of decolonization have found ways of appropriating some of the "master's tools," such as some forms of media technology, to Indigenous ends in order to rebuild their own houses. (18)

My own research follows along similar lines by emphasizing Cuthand as an artist subjected to the harsh realities of systemic power imbalances as well as someone capable of puncturing the narratives on which that power rests. Ultimately, my understanding of visual sovereignty is concerned with examining how Cuthand is able to confront an absence of representation by carving out a space for her own narratives. I understand this act as one that responds to existing hegemonic narratives but also as a creative gesture of self-determination. In order to consider the different ways that Cuthand's work operates along oppositional and generative terms, I will focus on three of her works: *Love & Numbers* (2004), *Colonization: the Second Coming* (1996), and *Boi Oh Boi* (2012). Within these works, I will consider the role of technology and specifically the legacy of video art in promoting visual sovereignty as well as Cuthand's use of humour as a tool of regeneration.

### **"I wanted to create a world where I could be loved":**

#### **Semiotics of resistance in *Love & Numbers***

Appearing in 2004, *Love & Numbers* offers the perspective of a more mature artist confronting similar issues that animated her earlier work. In the video, Cuthand examines love and relationships, her own mental illness, the legacy of colonial violence and the role of media in affecting all of these issues. Part exploratory essay and part confessional, the video consists of a

non-linear monologue in which Cuthand details the ubiquitous nature of code in everyday life, proceeds to imagine her love interest as a “covert agent” and recounts her time being hospitalized for mental illness. Cuthand also uses *Love & Numbers* to explore the psychological impact of viewing the fall of the World Trade Center, her experience of receiving “messages from the television” and her encounter with the ghosts of people who perished from violence. *Love & Numbers* interweaves all of these ideas and experiences together and in doing so reveals the relationships that exist amongst them.



**“Everything is code they say.” DVD still.**

*Love & Numbers* begins simply enough with the ubiquitous and easily recognizable image of a walk signal. Cuthand’s lens zooms in on a white static walking figure, making the edges blur and defamiliarizing the image away from its position in the symbolic order towards the unfamiliar and the aesthetic. Cuthand’s voice-over begins: “Everything is code they say. Language, DNA, pheromones, signals and semaphores, Morse code, digital data packets, binary code and body language. We’re constantly transmitting almost as if to remind us that we are here” (*Love & Numbers*). With this, Cuthand establishes code as something that operates on multiple divergent but interrelated biological, cultural, technological and interpersonal planes. Complicating code along these lines and casting such a broad net of meaning suggests that the thoughtful contemplation of code yields significance beyond a purely cultural scope. Additionally, Cuthand’s opening observation posits a connection between transmission and



presence when she suggests that “we’re constantly transmitting almost as if to remind us that we are here.” Thus, Cuthand positions the transmission of code as an act whose communicative function serves to validate the transmitting party. With these ideas in mind, I wish to proceed with my examination of *Love & Numbers* to think about the significance of asserting visual sovereignty in this context and to consider some of the ways it may be expressed.

Hinted at in the opening lines, *Love & Numbers* serves as Cuthand’s exploration of love, mental illness, and the legacy of colonialism, all explored through the prism of code and its indecipherability. In contrast to the opening shot of the easily recognizable walk signal, spliced in between each of the subsequent shots is a cryptic image of seemingly random white numbers scrolling across the black screen. At first glance it is obvious that some kind of code is transmitted with each scene, but its meaning is lost and it is not entirely clear whether the series of numbers carries any significance. It is only on an extradiegetic level that these numbers can be understood. The description of the video on her Vimeo account reads: “Spliced in between [Cuthand’s] monologues are the binary codes of all the psychiatric drugs she has taken” (“Love & Numbers” on Vimeo). With this information, the scenes take on new meaning as Cuthand positions even her psychiatric drugs as coded commodities. But I think it is also important to note how little meaning this actually offers us. We do not know which drugs the codes refer to and even if we did, the cold neutrality afforded by binary code can speak little to the *experience* of taking the drugs and/or being in a position of needing to take the drugs. In many ways, the inclusion of this code serves not to explicate her experience but rather to highlight how unsuitable existing forms of code and communication are when it comes to talking about the messy lived experience of mental illness.

This lack of communication that takes place in these scenes sets up what will be a recurring idea in much of the video. Miscommunication is expressed in a variety of ways in *Love & Numbers*. Whether by misunderstanding or omission, mutual communication and understanding repeatedly fail. It is within this context that I wish to think about visual sovereignty in this piece. Given my particular interest in media, I want to pay particular attention to the way that Cuthand highlights an absence of media representation and the impact thereof. At

one point, we see what appears to be some kind of transmission tower reflected in the windows of a tall office building. The image appears as a jumble of lines that are discernable but abstracted by Cuthand's zoomed-in and shaky lens. In short, her images position the transmitter as an unstable and inaccessible site. Meanwhile, Cuthand describes how: "In the hospital, they ask if I am getting messages from the television. Of course I am. It tells me what to buy, how to live, shows me a world where I'm not there" (*Love & Numbers*). Here the expressed uncertainty in the corresponding images is grounded in a particular emphasis on madness and media representation. Cuthand invokes the cliché of mad persons "receiving messages" but suggests that this is in fact a very real thing. Indeed, Cuthand's insistence on receiving messages from the television highlights the often unspoken but ever present pedagogical function of television. This pedagogical function is compounded by another role it plays in validating particular bodies, identities and communities over others. I do not consider it a coincidence that this particular moment is also the first instance we learn about Cuthand's placement in a psychiatric medical facility. That the introduction of mental illness occurs in this particular video at this moment of critical engagement with media representation suggests a connection between the two.

Cuthand furthermore underlines this connection in another scene in which the camera adopts a P.O.V. position of Cuthand's feet encased in hospital slippers, walking along the hospital floor while the speed of the image gradually increases. Cuthand explains, "They think they know why I went crazy, but they don't know the real reason. I wanted to create a world where I could be loved" (*Love & Numbers*). The parallel construction of Cuthand's description of a "world [on television] where I'm not there" and "a world where I could be loved" brings the two scenes together and suggests that the two sentiments may be related. From this perspective, Cuthand must create for herself a world in which she exists and can be loved. This kind of generative act brings to mind the likewise generative quality of visual sovereignty in addition to articulating its *raison d'être*. In the face of an absence of representation, Cuthand must make a space for herself. That this space is one in which she can be *loved* highlights the relevance of the interpersonal dimension in thinking about visual sovereignty and the need to create space for oneself as a gesture whose impact exceeds beyond the purely cultural. Along similar lines, it is

worth thinking about the fact that according to Cuthand it is this act that is interpreted as madness. With this in mind, mental illness is positioned away from being understood as purely biological. Instead, Cuthand's video acknowledges it as being at least partially culturally determined. In this context, those on the fringes are cornered into a position of creating to confront the erasure they experience only to have their gesture invalidated by a hegemonic madness narrative. This scene therefore demonstrates the significance of asserting visual sovereignty by suggesting that existing narratives are insufficient in dealing with marginalized perspectives and therefore those on the margins must create their own space in order to offer a different narrative from the one that disempowers them. It is from this perspective that I wish to consider the radical potential of Cuthand's video in the way that it asserts visual sovereignty by carving out an intersectionally nuanced space for Cuthand.

Looking specifically at the visual and auditory elements that build this space, I want to think about how Cuthand asserts visual sovereignty by crafting her own subjective presence in *Love & Numbers*. Thus, I think it is important to consider just how Cuthand's monologue voiceover consistently positions Cuthand and her particular perspective at the centre of her videos. It is a characteristic that is hardly unique to *Love & Numbers* and is in fact present in much of her oeuvre. I borrow from Mary Ann Doane's understanding of interior monologue to think about the voice as a "privileged mark of interiority, turning the body 'inside-out'" (41). Indeed, Cuthand's voice functions in many of her pieces as a form that draws from and blurs distinctions between narration, interior monologue, and confession. Drawing from Denis Vasse, I locate the voice "[i]n the partition of the organic and organization, in the partition between the biological body and the body of language, or, if one prefers, the social body" (translation qtd. in Silverman 21). From this perspective, I want to think about the voice's particularly adept positioning as a vehicle to address the mutually constitutive nature of biological and social bodies. This takes on particular relevance given the importance of voice in Indigenous oral storytelling traditions. As Gabriel S. Estrada recounts, the voice has played a particularly important role in preserving Two-Spirit traditions that were otherwise illegal to express in the midst of colonial law (169). From this perspective, Cuthand's voice continues along a broader

trajectory of Two-Spirit storytelling, in which she privileges the personal and shares her own particular perspective. The latter allows for her to both hear herself and have herself be heard. In this way, Cuthand's monologue allows her to assert visual sovereignty by recounting her own story on her own terms.

In tandem with her use of voice, the visual also imparts this sense of personal perspective. Returning to the image of Cuthand's feet in the hospital slippers, this P.O.V. shot very much embodies a kind of subjective positioning. Such videowork asks of its viewer to not only see what Cuthand sees but *how* she sees it. Considering the absence of representation that Cuthand has already outlined, the radical potential of this positioning lies in its ability to not only claim a cultural space for its creator but allow the viewer to observe a viewpoint outside of white straight male orthodoxy. This sense of presence is also felt in the shakiness of several of the camera shots, in which we get the sense of Cuthand holding the camera. Although we may not see her face in these moments, she is able to pronounce her presence through her handling of the camera and the positioning of herself through point-of-view shots. The result is that rather than looking at her as object of the camera's gaze, we are invited to look at her as subject. In doing so, the visuals function with the audio to assert visual sovereignty by positioning Cuthand as an active agent whose unique perspective is presented to us on her own terms.

We can locate this sense of increased agency within a broader tradition of video art and its use by marginalized communities. To offer but one example, JoAnn Hanley suggests that “[w]ithout the burdens of tradition linked with other media, women video artists were freer to concentrate on process, often using video to explore the body and the self through the genres of history, autobiography, and examinations of gender identity” (10). By considering this broader context, I can reiterate that the goal of concentrating on Cuthand and her use of video technology is not an attempt to argue for her solitary genius but rather to think about how her particular use of video serves the ends of visual sovereignty. Hanley's point is interesting precisely because it highlights the matter of historical baggage that each medium brings and how this might impact an artist's ability to carve out a place for herself. Thus, artists must contend both with the legacies of representation which make up a common visual culture and the legacies of the media

that produce such work. The relative novelty that video afforded therefore offered a space for new forms, new voices and new bodies outside of the white heteropatriarchal order to create representations that came out of and spoke to their own communities. Focusing on the development of video offers but one avenue for contemplating the practical factors that limit and spur visual sovereignty

I will return to consider Cuthand's work within a larger context of video artists as I continue my investigation of visual sovereignty in this chapter. For now though, I want to take the opportunity to consider how the video's engagement with time also functions to express visual sovereignty. In one scene, Cuthand's images break up into static fragments of streetlights in darkness abstracted into lines and curves. Cuthand's monologue informs us:

I hear the signals from the old ones, the ones who came before. They line up in my bedroom at night to tell me their sad stories because I don't mind listening and a compassionate ear is hard to find. The women and children at Sand Creek don't want to be crying anymore. The people who died at Seaton House are tired of wandering in fear. And those women at the Pickton farm want to feel the warm arms of love.

I want to think about how Cuthand's inclusion of "the old ones" suggests an interpretation of time that diverges from a Western understanding that locates the past as distinct from the present. This interpretation borrows from Bliss Cua Lim, whose work in *Translating Time: Cinema, the Fantastic and Temporal Critique* examines fantastic cinema from the Philippines from a Bergsonian perspective. In her analysis, she considers how these films insist upon "the existence of multiple times that fail to coincide with the measured, uniform intervals quantified by clock and calendar" (2). In doing so, Lim suggests that these films "[disclose] the limits of historical time" thereby disrupting the Western logic of historical progress that fuels imperialism (2). To understand the significance of this gesture, I look once again to Raheja, who examines the way in which media artists Chris Eyre and Shelley Niro employ prophecy to disrupt Western chronology and re-engage Indigenous epistemologies. Raheja draws from the work of Beverly Sourjohn Patchell to suggest that:

What is conceived of as the past is endlessly available through cultural modes such as one's relationship to the land, language, dance, song, and stories that have rested in dormancy, despite over five hundred years of colonialism and attempted genocide. These modes have changed but are nevertheless accessible through embodied memory, dreams, the process of writing, imagination and (...) film.  
(183)

We can therefore think about how Cuthand's description of "the old ones" locates the past—a past that is specifically violent, racist and misogynist—within a present that is conceived by her through imagination. By reanimating this past, Cuthand locates past acts of violence and injustice as very much belonging to the contemporary moment. It is fitting then that Cuthand's broken images of abstracted light serve to similarly break up a sense of progression in the video. The jagged motion from shot to shot disrupts the natural flow of realism that would otherwise proceed. But more than that, Cuthand specifically positions this gesture as one that takes place through the act of storytelling and bearing witness. It suggests the radical possibility of visual sovereignty may lie just as much in this act of our listening as it does in the telling of stories. Returning to the idea that transmission produces presence, we can think about how telling stories and listening to them are acts that confirm the subjectivity of both parties.



**"I feel like I've missed the signal yet again." DVD still.**

I conclude by returning to where my analysis of *Love & Numbers* began with the matter of code and (mis)communication. The video ends with a close-up image of faded candy hearts that read “sweet heart” and “I love you” as Cuthand describes an interaction with a love interest. Cuthand informs us, “The first time we saw each other after the hospital, she calls me sweetheart. I don’t know how she means it. Unsure footing, we hug. I feel like I’ve missed the signal yet again” (*Love & Numbers*). The video therefore ends on a note of interpersonal miscommunication. But the positioning of the candy hearts places this miscommunication within a particular cultural context whereby love is mediated by simple and easily consumable trite phrases, which act as a source of confusion when employed by the lover. In spite of this, the video concludes with a dedication: “For Robin”.<sup>12</sup> This final gesture repositions the video such that Cuthand’s examination of miscommunication itself becomes an attempt at communicating with a loved one. I understand this last act as a final example of visual sovereignty, one in which Cuthand asserts that her own expression of intimacy will be in the form of this non-linear, non-didactic video that insists on an understanding of relationships that is complex and confusing. In this way, *Love & Numbers* not only offers a challenge to the white patriarchal order by emphasizing queer and Indigenous perspectives, but the way that she addresses these questions of intimacy and meaning-making also serves to undermine the kind of uncritical storytelling that nourishes hegemony. We can therefore locate *Love & Numbers* as an example of visual sovereignty that identifies and reacts against modes of representation that would erase Cuthand or confine her with restrictive simplicity. But in addition, Cuthand is able to use her video to generate her own story, according to her own perspective and in her own non-linear way.

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<sup>12</sup> While Robin is never explicitly connected to the unnamed love interest in *Love & Numbers*, I do not consider it a coincidence that this dedication appears directly after this final scene. Robin also appears explicitly as a love interest in *Boi oh Boi*.

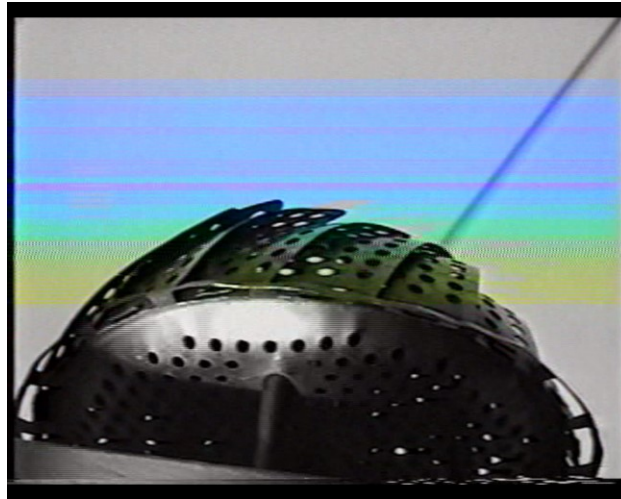
### **“Colonization? *Again?*”:**

#### **Humorous destabilizations of genre in *Colonization: the Second Coming***

Returning now to an earlier example of Cuthand’s work, I will look at *Colonization: The Second Coming* (1996). Produced during her teenage years, *Colonization* very much embodies the kind of playful and lo-fi storytelling that Cuthand established in her early videomaking practice. The video tells the story of alien invasion brought about by the activation of Cuthand’s newly acquired vibrator and her role in disrupting their colonial plans by explaining to the aliens that they are not the first colonizers. My particular interest in *Colonization* stems from my desire to examine humour as a destabilizing and generative force with which to carve out visual sovereignty in the science-fiction invasion narrative, a genre typically dominated by a white heteropatriarchal gaze. In contrast to the largely autobiographical voice that has dominated the works I have explored so far, this video takes on a more absurd and narrative-based approach while nonetheless serving as a vehicle for exploring identity and power.

The video begins with a close-up of Cuthand’s hand clasped onto a mug as she informs us “I’ve got a story to tell you” (*Colonization*). It is an opening that immediately places us in a position of intimacy as Cuthand establishes herself as a storyteller amongst friends. She proceeds to describe the occasion of getting her first vibrator while on a trip to Toronto. Returning home to Saskatoon, she decides to “take the plunge” when “something very strange started happening.” The shot cuts to an image of a wildly shaking lamp, being quite clearly manipulated by Cuthand’s own hand, as she informs us “the Earth started shaking, and I knew it wasn’t just me.” After putting her pants back on and running downstairs, she spots “something very strange” in her backyard. The video then cuts to a close-up shot of a vegetable steamer turned upside down with the spotlight from a flashlight illuminating its surface. “Wow,” exclaims Cuthand. “It was a spaceship” (*Colonization*).





**The arrival of the spaceship. DVD still.**

With this opening, Cuthand establishes two ideas that are essential to my exploration of this work. Firstly, it sets up her interest in playing with the conventions of the science fiction genre, specifically taking on the alien invasion narrative. Secondly, it sets up that Cuthand will be approaching the genre from a particular lo-fi perspective with an emphasis on the handmade and the humorous. While I will return later on in this section to consider the implications of her lo-fi style, for now I wish to concentrate on Cuthand's approach to genre. The aliens, represented by little green men, and their dramatic arrival recall a particular and stereotypical version of the familiar alien takeover narrative. In doing so, Cuthand's video invokes the complicated anxieties that those Hollywood films relate. The alien invasion story has already been examined as a fruitful site through which Western, typically American, anxieties are expressed concerning but not limited to communists, changing gender roles and sexualities, race, immigration and more generally a fear of the Other.<sup>13</sup> Patrick Lucanio notes that the archetypal invasion story begins with a male hero who sees the invaders arrive, and Susan A. George adds that this hero is also typically white, very much embodying a kind of heteronormative patriarchal subjectivity

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<sup>13</sup> Much has already been written about this topic. For examination of the invasion genre and its attitude towards gender, I recommend Susan A. George's *Gendering Science Fiction Films*. Meanwhile, Adilifu Nama's *Black Space: Imagining Race in Science Fiction Film* provides helpful commentary for thinking about the racial anxieties animating much of these films.

(Lucanio 32; George 9). With Cuthand's voice anchoring her story, her video therefore begins from a markedly different perspective. Occupying an identity which on several levels represents a kind of Other position, at least by the terms prescribed by mainstream Hollywood representation, Cuthand's narrative alters the meaning of the invasion narrative by placing the conventionally Other as Subject. The significance of this refocusing is exemplified when Cuthand asks the aliens what they want, and they reply that they came to colonize the Earth. Cuthand's replies, "Colonization? *Again?*" (*Colonization*). It is a response whose humour and significance stems from our knowledge of the conventions of invasion films, which never so explicitly pointed out the irony of white America's fear of invasion. Borrowing from Richard Slotkin's examination of the Frontier Myth, Susan A. George examines how Hollywood invasion stories typically mirror the savage war stage in the Frontier Myth, in which wars of extermination take place with the aliens in most cases playing the role of the "bloodthirsty savages" (7). With Cuthand as protagonist, suddenly the knowledge of North America's own invasion story—the dispossession and genocide of its Indigenous peoples—shifts into focus. In doing so, it resists the traditional terms which dictate the invasion narrative by challenging the assumptions, both in terms of audience and history, which inform the traditional narrative. And as we will see, Cuthand's video also starts to generate its own story—this time with an Aboriginal Butch Lesbian at its centre. Along these lines, Cuthand is able to reorient the classic Hollywood invasion story and specifically employ humour to begin a process towards visual sovereignty.

Indeed, I would argue that this particular video really showcases the power of humour as a tool of resistance. In part, we can locate humour as a tool of resistance in so far as it is employed to approach the intersectionally manifested effects of power. Along this reactive plane, Cuthand's use of humour serves to subvert what Bernd Peyer calls "the still widely accepted stereotype of the stoic Indian" (qtd. in Lischke 236). As Cuthand herself explains, "the representations [of Native Americans] are pretty dire, like you know, really rough lives, and that wasn't my community. Like there were rough times in my community, but that wasn't all there was. There was a lot of humour and love too, and I wasn't seeing that being represented either" (Interview). But more than subverting stereotypes, Cuthand's use of humour also functions as a

means of Indigenous self-expression. As Cuthand explains, “It’s hard to talk about serious issues and be funny at the same time. But in my culture, that’s the way we approach those issues. Humour is a coping mechanism for people who are oppressed: if you can laugh, you can survive. I’m Cree, and we laugh a *lot*” (qtd. in Eisner 402). Notably, the way that Cuthand talks about humour in her work positions it specifically as a means through which she expresses her identity as Cree. Thinking about her use of humour from this perspective, we can observe that approaching the topic of colonization through humour serves to both *react* to its enduring legacy and *enact* a mode of Cree subjectivity. Doing so allows Cuthand to assert visual sovereignty via the kind of double-pronged approach to resistance that concerns this thesis.

The way in which the video addresses the relationship between sexuality and colonization offers another productive vector for thinking about this process of visual sovereignty as expressed through humour. With the vibrator at the heart of Cuthand's story there is an obvious way in which sex plays a key role on the level of plot. Cuthand recounts that “they were summoned by some sort of beacon, which I was apparently still holding” (*Colonization*). The medium close-up shot lingers on the vibrator in her hand. The idea of the vibrator as beacon reorients the vibrator from object of sexual agency to a more complicated and ambivalent position. After all, Cuthand’s act of sexual subjectivity is ultimately interrupted by the intrusion of the aliens. In many ways, the interruption of Cuthand's self-pleasuring by this latest colonial power recalls a broader historical context by which colonialism effectively interrupted polyvalent expressions of sexuality across Indigenous cultures (Gomez-Galisteo 168). But more than that, the vibrator calls attention to the way colonization is inscribed in not just sexual but masculine terms. Notably, upon discovering the reason for the aliens' arrival, Cuthand refers to the vibrator as a “damned phallic object” (*Colonization*). The framing of the vibrator in such a way importantly addresses colonization as an act of aggressive masculinity. Colonization after all has a long history of being described as an act of masculine penetration and (sexual) conquest in which “metaphors of ‘deflowering’ or taking the ‘virgin lands’ abound” (Slater 34).



**The “beacon” that summons. DVD still.**

However, Cuthand is hardly an image of passive female sexuality. As she informs the aliens "if you don't mind, I'm kind of horny right now, and I don't feel like dealing with you" as a close-up shot focuses on her zipping up her fly (*Colonization*). The frankness of her declaration along with the directness of the image allows her to disrupt the conventional logic of colonial exploitation. Doing so serves to rewrite the colonial narrative such that agency is afforded to queer female sexuality. In this way, Cuthand's act of visual sovereignty—of taking an existing violent narrative and creating her own—both engages with and critiques traditional colonial narratives while producing an alternative vision with a horny lesbian subject at its centre.

Part of building a new story involves addressing the intersectional nature of how power is expressed through the different vectors of her identity. When the aliens ask her what she means that she has already been colonized, she details to them the oppression she faces as an Aboriginal, as a lesbian and as a woman. She explains, “To prove my point, I invited them inside for a cup of tea and then read to them from various bell hooks essays. Five hours later, the aliens started complaining of headaches. They said that if I didn’t mind, they’d just get back to their ship and leave” (*Colonization*). The sequence of accompanying shots moves from one of a tea pot and mug to a shot of hooks’ *Yearning: Race, gender, and cultural politics* and lastly to a close-up of the alien’s face. This series of close-ups forgoes a sense of space in favour of flattened images in which a feeling of relative stasis is created. In doing so, she not only offers a

helpful description of the complicated nature of systemic violence, she also humorously subverts the invasion genre and its tendency towards lavish and violent showdowns that depend on the speed of images and cuts to foster a sense of realism. Instead, the aliens share tea with Cuthand and the showdown becomes a teaching moment that ends with the aliens leaving in peace, albeit complaining of headaches. This upset of genre thereby serves to engage with its own form of conflict resolution, one that is distanced from a traditional masculine Hollywood form of extravagant destruction. Thus, her confrontation with the aliens becomes a confrontation with conventional North American history as she informs the aliens about the destructive legacy of colonization. As she does, the margins are brought to the centre, past injustices are addressed and visual sovereignty takes the form of this new story she tells.

An essential part of telling this new story revolves around the very form of her video practice. After all, I would argue it is this form that permits her to explore subversive material. On a very practical level, her dependence on and employment of low technology and domestic props means that Cuthand possesses the financial independence necessary to impart her own story unfiltered through the mechanisms of industry. As Cuthand explains, “a lot of my work is actually self-funded. A lot of them have been one hundred dollar videos where you just get some people in a space and shoot. Buying food and props is pretty much like all I spend money on” (Interview). While I wouldn't want to insist that visual sovereignty must necessarily depend on such an extreme example of lo-fi film/videomaking, I think it is important to consider the very real economic conditions that impact one's ability to assert visual sovereignty. Doing so I think points to both the limitations that affect visual cultural output as well as the strength of video to overcome at least some of those challenges.

But more than that, I am interested in how Cuthand's aesthetic exhibits a handmade quality that positions her video on a frequency of what may variously be described as amateur, personal and queer. Whether it is her use of handwritten credits or household props, Cuthand's videomaking depends on an intimate approach in which the story is inscribed with the use of the personal and the everyday. Indeed, this handmade quality is also an important if not essential source of much of the video's humour. The spaceship is a vegetable steamer; props are clearly

being manipulated by Cuthand's own hands. In many ways, Cuthand's video depends on an aesthetic of failure to tell her story. Here I borrow from Jack Halberstam's understanding of "the queer art of failure" to think about how Cuthand's embrace of a DIY aesthetic doubles as an aesthetic that proudly announces its shortcomings. I use "shortcomings" specifically in comparison to the hegemonic Hollywood order that places an assumed value on realism in filmmaking and an appreciation for big budget special effects. One can look to *Independence Day*, also released in 1996, as a perfect example of both the value placed on a particular realist mode of filmmaking for the purpose of telling a story in which settler-America is threatened but ultimately reconfirmed as the dominant and morally righteous world power. In contrast to films like *Independence Day*, *Colonization: the Second Coming* very much embraces its failure to achieve any comparable aesthetic. Even Cuthand's success at the end of the film in convincing the aliens to abandon their colonial plans is ultimately inverted to be read as failure. Only as the aliens are leaving does Cuthand realize that "if you colonized Earth then we'd all be equal. Come back here!" (*Colonization*). This final reversal of expectations therefore destabilizes the terms of the invasion genre once again to disrupt expectations of what makes for a happy ending for someone from a multiply marginalized perspective. In this way, Cuthand's reconfiguration of the science fiction invasion narrative functions through a process of reorienting the perspective of the invasion narrative and reimagining its dimensions, significance and style. I have argued for a perspective that understands this approach as both reactive in terms of engaging with the established conventions of the genre as well as an act of creative growth wherein Cuthand has employed humour as a tool of regeneration. This act on the part of Cuthand is rooted in a particularly intersectional understanding of the self and the systemic forms of power that inform that self. In short, I understand *Colonization: the Second Coming* as an example of visual sovereignty as expressed through an intersectional lens wherein humour serves as the primary vehicle of destabilization and creation.

## **"This body has become home":**

### **Visual sovereignty as fluid strategy in *Boi Oh Boi***

I end my examination of Cuthand's work by looking at *Boi Oh Boi* (2012), a work whose emphasis on the murkiness of identity will serve as an appropriate means of complicating visual sovereignty as a strategy that is similarly unfixed. Appearing in 2012, *Boi Oh Boi* offers us a much more recent example of Cuthand's work. And although it is a work similarly concerned with identity, more than others this video is concerned with exploring identity as an unfixed and malleable territory. In the work, Cuthand recounts her experiences with questioning her gender, temporarily deciding to live as a man but ultimately deciding to embrace an understanding of her gender as Butch in a Two-Spirit framework.

*Boi Oh Boi* begins with Cuthand looking into the mirror as she arranges her hair. Her voiceover tells us, "When I was in high school, I asked my soon-to-be one-time lover, do you think I'm butch or femme? I was clearly butch but hadn't yet identified myself. I really wanted to know. I think she was being polite because she just said 'I don't know'" (*Boi Oh Boi*). From the outset then, Cuthand establishes a concern for identity within a distinctly queer framework and specifically identity as it is expressed through physical appearance. Emphasizing the body as a site with which to explore questions of identity and power runs the risk of reproducing the kind of body-centric discourse that has been used to marginalize particular groups. Yet as Mary Ann Doane notes, "it is precisely because the body has been a major site of oppression that perhaps it must be the site of the battle to be waged" (50).

It also establishes the relative marginality of butch identity within this context given the fact that Robin is "polite" to not identify her as such. Jack Halberstam discusses the positioning of the butch lesbian (or rather her absence) in popular culture as a site of perpetual failure. He explains:

[The butch lesbian] stands in for failure in consumer culture writ large because her masculinity becomes a block to heteronormative male desire. (...) [S]he threatens the male viewer with the horrifying spectacle of the 'uncastrated' woman and challenges the straight female viewer because she refuses to participate in the

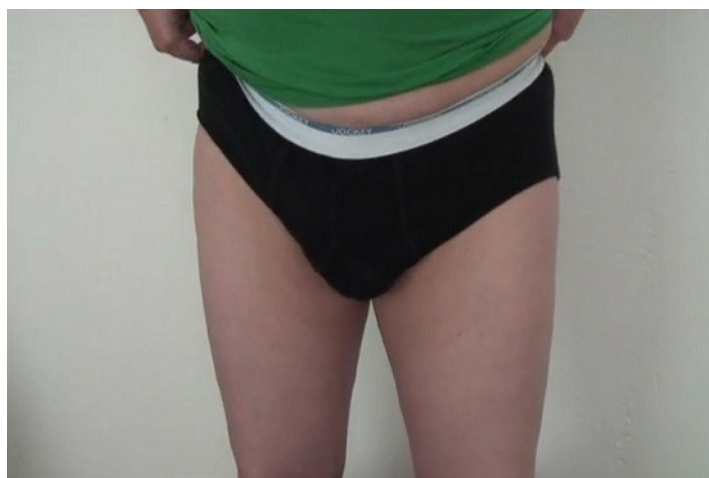
conventional masquerade of hetero-femininity as weak, unskilled, and unthreatening. (Halberstam 95-96)

It is within this context that *Boi Oh Boi* therefore serves as an unabashed portrait of queer butch identity. Indeed, much of the video serves to put the butchness of Cuthand's body on full display. This can be seen in part with the video's emphasis on showing Cuthand at work. Throughout the video, we see Cuthand performing activities such as digging, watering plants, driving her car, and working on said vehicle. Such shots reveal an active butch body that anchors the video's interest in physical appearance within the practicality that Cuthand herself underscores as central to her own image. She describes how: "Sometimes I wonder if my brand of butch is just sheer laziness—the comfiest clothing and the simplest to put on. Easy to wash—I usually throw it all in the wash on permanent press and walk away" (*Boi Oh Boi*). Despite the ordinary quality of Cuthand's vignettes of her at work, the frequency with which they occur in the video insists on their significance. Indeed, I feel that an important part of the video's aesthetic is the home video quality that characterizes many of the shots. Domestic shots of Cuthand at home with her dogs recalls a kind of everyday videorecording process. But at the same time, there is a strong element of performance that dominates the video. Taken together, we can locate the video within an aesthetic concerned with performance in everyday life.

Perhaps the most obvious scenes that depict this emphasis on everyday performance of her butch identity are in the sequences where she stands in front of the camera in her underwear, placing her form on full display. In these instances, Cuthand's partial nudity feels like a blunt gesture, its heroism once again rooted in the ordinariness of the act. In several of these segments, Cuthand's framing segments her body, positioning her crotch in the frame's centre, isolated from the rest of her body. It is the kind of framing which in other contexts (here I am thinking primarily of a classical Hollywood heteropatriarchal gaze) could easily be classified as objectifying. But with Cuthand's use of the framing, the placement of her crotch at the centre becomes instead an assertion of self. I am reminded of Amelia Jones' exploration of Hannah Wilke's work and the way it functions to "exaggerat[e] [the rhetoric of the pose] beyond its veiled patriarchal functions of female objectification" (*Body Art* 152). Similarly, Cuthand's



close-ups function to disrupt a patriarchal gaze through both the exaggerated emphasis on the crotch and the fact that this body on display visibly does not conform to the object of straight male desire. As Jones notes, “when the body in performance is female, obviously queer, nonwhite, exaggeratedly (hyper) masculine, or otherwise enacted against the grain of the normative subject, the hidden logic of exclusionism underlying modernist art history and criticism is exposed” (9). While Jones' particular interest is in destabilizing notions of the modernist artist, I wish to adapt her critique to consider how the exaggerated image of marginalized identities serve equally as a confrontation of audiovisual representation, thereby asserting a kind of visual sovereignty wherein the traditionally marginalized body comes to occupy quite literally the centre of the image. By drawing attention to a body in such an exaggerated way that does not conform to white heteronormative standards, these fragmented shots assert visual sovereignty by insisting that the butch body is a form worthy of occupying the frame's centre.



**Butch body on display. DVD still.**

Central to thinking about the way that Cuthand constructs her butch identity is the playful and confident way in which Cuthand approaches her body in these scenes. At one point, Cuthand places a banana in her underwear and holds it proudly against her body. At another moment, the close-up cuts away so that we see Cuthand cheerfully flexing her muscles as if playing the role of bodybuilder. Indeed, I think play is a key word to think about the way that Cuthand approaches

her body, her gender as well as her videomaking. In her voice-over, Cuthand recounts how “In 2007 when I was twenty-nine, I was considering transitioning to male. I changed my name informally to Sarain, which is what I would have been called had I been born a boy. I made a packer out of hair gel, condoms and a sock and wore baggy shirts to try and hide my tits—which didn’t really work because I have large breasts” (*Boi Oh Boi*). As Cuthand describes her time of living as a boy, she presents herself in front of the camera and treating it like a mirror begins to play with her appearance. First she begins by putting on a moustache—the cheap kind likely to be sold for a couple of dollars at a costume store. Then she proceeds to put a tie on. All the while, Cuthand is not simply adopting these masculine markers, she is trying them out. Throughout the sequence, Cuthand plays with her facial expressions as if looking in a mirror and trying to discern if she likes what she sees. It is process of play whereby Cuthand makes exaggerated faces and kissing gestures to try out her new look. Underscoring this, the sequence is shot in a kind of grainy black and white, invoking a silent film era level of highly stylized performance. In this way, Cuthand highlights an understanding of gender that is both performative and playful. Concerning the latter, I want to think about how her use of video creates this playful space of identity exploration. In many ways, Cuthand takes the Butlerian idea of gender performance as an opportunity to try out different identities. And although she must contend with the pre-existing ways gender is conceived of, visual sovereignty emerges from the way that she maneuvers through these ideas of masculinity and femininity, trying out which qualities fit her best.

I have used the term “try out” because I think this captures the exploratory and non-committal attitude with which this video approaches questions of gender identity. Already alerted to at the start of the sequence, Cuthand’s breasts present a point of contention in her consideration to transition. Cuthand continues by explaining, “There was something heroic about my breasts—great big cushions that felt just right pressed against someone else’s breasts. I wasn’t sure I wanted to lose that” (*Boi Oh Boi*). Cuthand’s exploration of her likes and dislikes between the two gender poles offers a perspective on gender that does not conform to the binary or even the assumed narrative of gender transitioning. For example, at one point Cuthand describes how she had tried a testosterone shot a few years before because “I was curious” and

“trans men always seemed to be talking about how it made them extra horny and to be honest, I wanted some extra horniness in my life” (*Boi Oh Boi*). This kind of playful exploration of identity and her own body stands in contrast to the dominant narrative of transitioning that the medical community enforces and stands guard over. As Dean Spade recounts in his chapter entitled “Mutilating Gender,” what he refers to as “the gatekeepers” of Sex Reassignment Surgery require “the successful recitation of the transsexual narrative” in order to obtain authorization for surgery (319). As a consequence, such an approach “permits only the production of gender normative altered bodies and seeks to screen out alterations that are resistant to a dichotomized, naturalized view of gender” (Spade 319). In contrast, Cuthand’s story asserts an understanding of gender that is concerned with the malleability of gender and identifying with both the feminine and masculine qualities of herself. By the end of the sequence, Cuthand explains that she ultimately chose against transitioning. We then watch her take off the fake moustache and untie the tie around her neck. Her exploration of these markers of masculinity has therefore been temporary but nonetheless constructive.



**Playing with masculinity. DVD still.**

Ultimately, Cuthand discusses how she came to identify with butch as her gender in addition to approaching her gender identity from a specifically Indigenous perspective. She tells us:

I remember reading about Two Spirited people when I first came out—about women who lived as men and went hunting and to war and took wives and rode

horses bare-chested like men (...). I sometimes think about what my role in my tribe would have been if colonization hadn't happened—if I was dealing with being Queer from a position completely uninfluenced by white Western thought. I think hunting and fighting would have been a very un-Thirza thing to do. I think I would have tried to opt out of that. (*Boi Oh Boi*)

Cuthand's decision to approach her gender from an Indigenous perspective reflects a larger trend amongst LGBTQ people in Indigenous communities seeking to locate their gender identity within a decolonizing framework. Two-Spirit was a term "coined in 1990 by Native American individuals during the third Native American/First Nations gay and lesbian conference in Winnipeg" as a means to distinguish themselves from queer settler identities (Jacobs, Thomas and Lang 2-3). It acts as a fluid term, referring to "a number of Native American roles and identities past and present" (Jacobs, Thomas and Lang 2). As a term, it seeks to queer notions of Indigeneity and decolonize queer identity. Qwo-Li Driskill, Chris Finley, Brian Joseph Gilley, and Scott Lauria Morgensen suggest that, "When linked, *queer* and *Two-Spirit* invite critiquing heteronormativity as a colonial project, and decolonizing Indigenous knowledges of gender and sexuality as one result of that critique" (3).

I am particularly interested in how Cuthand uses this sequence to *imagine* a decolonized approach to gender identity. By putting forth a "what if colonization had not happened" scenario, Cuthand is able to imagine an alternative to the history that confines her to a simple gender binary. I do not view this approach as delusional for its focus on a past and a present that did not happen. To the contrary, I understand it as a creative act; even if Cuthand cannot exist outside of a colonial framework, she may imagine her way outside of it. Such an approach is therefore not so much a denial of history or of colonialism's devastating impact but rather an exploration of alternate approaches. To this extent, imagining alternative versions of history has much less to do with the past than it does with imagining alternative futures. I think this provides a helpful thread for thinking about the potential impact of visual sovereignty and the way in which it exists both within and outside of hegemonic colonial discourse. After all, works of visual sovereignty do not escape the concrete settler-colonial realities of which they are a part. Rather, we can think about

how these works open up space to imagine possibilities outside of colonialist discourse and in this way assert the sovereignty of their vision.

I wanted to end with *Boi Oh Boi* precisely because it offers an example of visual sovereignty wherein the expressed self gains power by virtue of its fluidity and its playfulness. As Cuthand herself maintains in the video, “From this body to that body, this body has become home—although in terms of gender identity I do feel like a nomad. I’m content now as a Butch” (*Boi Oh Boi*). Cuthand therefore explains a fluid approach to gender by locating it both within a *Two-Spirit* framework and by specifically invoking the notion of the nomad to question the white, Western gender binary. Cuthand ends this final sequence by removing the banana in her pants and eating it with a large grin on her face, expressing once again a sense of playfulness with the process of her gender questioning. If in *Colonization: the Second Coming*, humour served as a creative means of destabilizing genre cinema towards ends of visual sovereignty, we can think about how humour is used in *Boi Oh Boi* as an exploratory device towards an understanding of gender and sexuality that is complicated, changing and anticolonial. Along similar lines, I want to think about visual sovereignty as a strategy that acts in a similarly fluid manner, capable of encompassing a multitude of diverging and intersecting identities and struggles. To this extent, I view visual sovereignty not as a clearly defined territory or as a checklist of required criteria but rather as a strategy located within a specifically Indigenous history capable of accommodating and indeed animating a variety of intersectional perspectives. Allowing for such an understanding therefore allows visual sovereignty to perform a multitude of functions and affords it a flexibility that I believe is necessary if it is to challenge the kinds of structured categorizations which themselves reproduce a kind of colonial violence. I therefore understand visual sovereignty as a flexible strategy in so far as it is capable of encompassing a complex understanding of identity. But so too do I locate this quality of flexibility in the way that visual sovereignty functions on both reactive and generative levels. By specifically positioning visual sovereignty as a strategy capable of such flexibility, I propose an understanding of resistance that insists on the complexity of understanding reactions to power imbalance.

## **In Summary**

My focus on visual sovereignty has also served to ground my understanding of resistance in the context of the audiovisual as a fruitful site for examining such questions of resistance. Borrowing from Raheja's understanding of visual sovereignty, I have argued for a particular interpretation of resistance as an act that extends beyond a strictly reactive framework. Instead, I have used visual sovereignty to think about the different ways in which resistance may take on both a reactive and a generative character. In doing so, I have used a specifically Indigenous framework to approach the topic of resistance. While the questions I have raised during my investigation extend beyond an Indigenous framework, I have tried to ground my arguments in the specificity afforded by visual sovereignty. In doing this, I have attempted to complicate frequently held but often unarticulated assumptions about the role of resistance and to relocate its significance outside of a Western-settler context. To this extent, my exploration has been concerned with paying attention to not only resistance but also the power dynamics at play when we discuss resistance.

I have argued for an interpretation of visual sovereignty, and by extension resistance, that emphasizes the fluid character of both. This fluidity, I have asserted, allows visual sovereignty to accommodate the complexity that accompanies intersectional understandings of power and to act as a malleable strategy. Thus, I have used visual sovereignty not to pin down a specific ideological territory but rather to try and open up questions about self-representation in the context of resistance. I have used it to examine the different forms resistance may take and to consider the power dynamics of how we choose to speak of it. In doing so, I have sought to distance my work from an understanding of resistance that concedes to a prescribed power dichotomy in which the resistor is framed in regard to the dominating power. Rather, I have used visual sovereignty to insist on an interpretation of resistance where the resisting group possesses agency and the ability to create within the context of their own community. Doing so has allowed me to highlight Cuthand as an artist producing her own narratives and asserting her own visual sovereignty in the work that she makes.

## **Conclusion**

I began this project with the intention to complicate resistance according to two primary vectors. First, I wished to explore intersectionality and think about the ways that it could productively be incorporated into a film studies context. Part of this process has involved addressing the limitations and difficulties that an intersectional framework presents and to confront these possible problems while addressing the limits of my own research. While I have hardly offered a comprehensive intersectional analysis of Cuthand's work (and frankly I doubt the possibility of such a task), I have opted to explore two frequently overlooked vectors of identity: age and mental health. I have not wished to paint such categories as naturally occurring entities. Rather, I have attempted to highlight how they are constructions that sometimes construct each other, although they remain real in terms of their impact. Using Cuthand's videos, I proceeded to demonstrate the kinds of patterns that emerge when one adopts an intersectional lens to examine power as a dynamic force simultaneously affecting different axes of identity. These patterns, I noted, emerge to reveal repeating narratives and tropes of power. I believe that identifying the relationship between these narratives is an important factor to recognize because of the way these narratives reinforce each other. Moreover, I looked at the importance of considering axes of identity in tandem by exploring how these vectors impact upon and can in fact produce each other. Specifically, I examined the impact of colonial racism and homophobia in producing the mentally ill subject. I proposed that the significance of intersectionality is therefore revealed by the entangled way that identity vectors affect each other. Lastly, I used intersectionality as a means of focusing on a particular recurring narrative of "benevolent" protection to justify disempowerment across different axes of identity. I ultimately proposed intersectionality is essential to complicating discussions of resistance in so far as effective resistance would require the mutual dismantling of power systems operating across the different identity vectors.

My second means of complicating resistance had to do with the way resistance positions the resisting party. My intent was to disrupt conventional ways of talking about resistance that understands it as a purely reactive gesture. Instead, I employed Raheja's concept of visual sovereignty to demonstrate an alternative means of thinking about resistance as an act that *may* react directly to the opposing party but that is also understood as a generative act that exists on its own terms and speaks to its own community. By using Raheja's concept of visual sovereignty, this strategy was purposefully rooted within an Indigenous framework. While I understand visual sovereignty as a strategy that functions specifically within this framework, I believe the issues my analysis raised are relevant to many different contexts. As such, while I have used visual sovereignty as a means of exploring the idea of generative resistance, I consider the latter an idea that can be imported into many different contexts. I believe the significance of considering resistance as generative would vary depending on the given context in which it is used. I will leave it to future scholarship to decide what the character of this resistance looks like and the work that it does in establishing agency. Indeed, I think the need to establish agency has fuelled much of my discussion of resistance. By positioning resistance away from the reactive model towards my generative understanding, I have sought to assert the agency of resisting parties. I have also attempted to articulate an understanding of resistance that places emphasis on the creativity involved in asserting a vision of self that may otherwise be absent. In my exploration of visual sovereignty as resistance, I proposed a non-exhaustive account of some of the different ways that this can be accomplished. Anchoring my examination in Cuthand's works, I considered how she asserts her visual sovereignty through a variety of methods. I looked at how Cuthand presents her particular perspective in her videomaking, representing a position that disrupts the white heteronormative filmic subject. I also considered how visual sovereignty can interact with genre, subverting conventions and refocusing the narrative in such a way that a new story with a unique marginalized perspective emerges. I paid particular attention to humour as a tool of visual sovereignty and the way that that this can not only serve to disrupt but also enact an understanding of self. Lastly, I considered how visual sovereignty can emerge from a fluid examination of identity whereby the goal is not so much to present a concrete understanding of



self but to explore different iterations in order to arrive at an understanding of one's identity. Understanding the latter journey as itself an important part of identity formation, I have sought to embrace visual sovereignty as a strategy sufficiently flexible to assert a vision of self that is similarly fluid, changing and complicated by different identity factors.

I conclude by returning to the title of this project. When I began this thesis, the concluding line of *Untouchable* stood out to me for the way that it succinctly captured many of the concerns explored in Cuthand's work and my research. Walking along a thin curb of pavement, Cuthand informs us, "I tread carefully and wait to finally be considered old enough. I wait to finally be considered" (*Untouchable*). The importance of being considered animates many of the concerns explored in this thesis. Specifically, I have focused on the role of media in this process of identity formation and validation with particular consideration given to a multiply-marginalized agent and her disruption of the hegemonic narratives that seek to confine her. In regard to the latter, I must concede that the title is to some extent a misnomer. Indeed, in her work, Cuthand seems uninterested in *waiting* to be considered. Rather, her work offers a positive statement of self, revealed on her own terms. From this perspective, Cuthand may still be waiting for the rest of society to take note of identities that fall outside of the white, settler patriarchal order, but regardless, Cuthand's work creates its own space for the artist to exist and speak to her communities.

Returning to this question of community, I think it is worthwhile to end this project by refocusing and reorienting Cuthand's work back into the communities it addresses and emerges from. Describing her videomaking process, Cuthand explains that "usually I talk to people to work through ideas and stuff like that. And then when it comes to actually shooting and like creating it, I get a lot of help from friends or people in the community who can help me out" (Interview). Thus, although this thesis has been concerned with looking at the videos themselves in order to consider questions of intersectionality and resistance, it is important to underline how these works emerge out of communities and that Cuthand is not the only participant in their creation. In this way, I recognize resistance as something that exists beyond the individual. Instead, I see it as something that is produced by and functions within a community.

And so I conclude by returning Cuthand to the context in which her work is actually viewed. While a thorough consideration of the different contexts in which her work is seen is outside the purview of this thesis, I have at least had the chance to view Cuthand's work publicly at two separate screenings. I have already briefly discussed my attendance at a retrospective of her work at SAW Gallery in 2013. In this instance, the screening was primarily, though not exclusively, speaking to fellow media artists and the focus was very much on reflecting on Cuthand's career as an artist. However, the screening I wish to explore in greater detail occurred at the Asinabka Film and Media Arts Festival in Ottawa in August 2015, an annual festival dedicated to Indigenous film and media art. Specifically, *Boi Oh Boi* was screened as a part of the program entitled "UnMENTionables: Indigenous Masculinities." In addition to providing a space for the contemplation of Indigenous masculinities, this particular program was noticeably funny and *Boi Oh Boi* generated a lot of laughter amongst the crowd, which variously included other Indigenous artists, members of the Indigenous community and settler observers. It provided a strong shift in tone from the previous program entitled "Survivors," which focused on Residential Schools and the legacy of abuse. And although it was a result of the festival's programming, I think it offers a helpful example for thinking through how visual sovereignty may actually be experienced on the level of audience interaction. Cuthand's video, along with the other videos featured in the program, served to reassert Indigenous agency in the face of systemic disempowerment and abuse and through its humour provided an opportunity to heal through joyful disruption. And although this thesis has been concerned with considering how Cuthand asserts visual sovereignty, I want to conclude by refocusing this gesture as one that is also experienced and shared by an audience. As Cuthand maintains: "I pretty much make work for my community. I think about who's going to watch it and what they're going to take away from it, how it's going to open people's minds to different issues that I'm working with or that other people are dealing with" (Interview). This emphasis on connecting with her community underlines the significance of thinking about questions of media representation and self-representation. I recall the scene in *Love & Numbers* where Cuthand hears signals "from the old ones" and acts as a witness to their suffering. In many ways, I think this scene reflects how

Cuthand's own work may function to offer a narrative for others to bear witness to and in the process see a part of themselves reflected back.

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## **Appendix:**

### **Interview with Thirza Cuthand**

**September 26, 2016**

**Toronto, Ontario**

Lisa Aalders (LA): All right. So first off, I mean I guess it's kind of a basic question, but I was wondering about your reasons for getting into video making. What was it that first, kind of, inspired you or set you on this track?

Thirza Cuthand (TC): Well, when I started out I was like, I was sixteen years old and it was '95. There wasn't a lot of representations of teenage lesbians at the time. Like, there was nothing out there. And so it really came about cause I wanted to create more representations of people like me and people in my community and that's kind of been like a driving force ever since.

LA: Yeah, I'm glad that you brought that up because that was basically my next question, was, I don't know, what was your, kind of, feelings growing up in terms of either the representation you *did* see or that you didn't see and how that affected your filmmaking?

TC: Like, again with the, there was no, no teenage lesbians at the time so even just to accept— Like, when I first came out when I was fourteen years old, like, I didn't really know that you could be a lesbian that young, like you could know that young. Like it was really like, it was, it was a very weird time. And then I read this article where someone talked about coming out as a lesbian when they were a teenager and I was like, "Oh, it's possible!"

[both laugh]

TC: So it's been like that since. But yeah, and then even, even just being Native, like, the representations were, like, pretty dire. Like, you know, really rough, rough lives and, you know, and that wasn't the community. Like yeah there was rough times in my community, but that wasn't all there was. You know, like, there was a lot of humour and love too, and I wasn't seeing that being represented either.

LA: Were there particular influences that you had, like, either video, other video artists, or artists, or were you just going off of your own...?

TC: Yeah there were actually two really important influences, were Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan who were these lesbian video artists in Winnipeg. And I saw their work before I actually made my first video. I saw it at the Out on Screen in Vancouver. And I realized it was something that I could, I could see myself doing and it made making videos seem more accessible. And yeah, that was kind of my inspiration. And then all their work since then I've really loved. And then another one is Dana Claxton. I first saw her work, it was "The Red Paper"; it was at the Vancouver Art Gallery. And that really inspired me for making more filmic work cause it's like a 16mm black and white film. And, yeah, and both of those, all those people I ended up being friends with, which is kind of interesting. But yeah, I think those are my two big early influences.

LA: I'm interested a bit in your process. Like what is the starting point for you when you're making a video or like how does—Like do you start with a particular idea, or something you want to explore, or...?

TC: Yeah, usually it starts with something I want to explore, like um, like a topic that's close to my heart. Yeah, it starts with, like a, like say something's really bothering me or even, maybe not bothering me, maybe just something I find funny that, like, the one I made most recently is an

infomercial about a Two-Spirit support telephone network. And that one, that one I just kind of thought it would be fun to make and I've never really made something that was just about being Two-Spirited, so yeah.

LA: Do you, how much do you plan out in advance when you're making your videos. Or do you just...

TC: Mostly what I do is I come up with like a monologue usually, like they've all been really monologue driven. And then I go from there and I just pick out, kind of like, images I want to go along with the words or I figure out how I'm gonna shoot it, like, if I'm gonna perform in front of the camera or if it's just gonna be images. It depends, yeah.

LA: I, yeah, this kind of, I think, goes back to what you were talking about in terms of your influences, but is community important when you're making your videos? It seems like you depend a lot on family and friends when you're...

TC: Yeah, yeah, I think so. Like, my grandpa was the first person to give me a video camera, so that's why he gets credit on most of my videos, just because of that, that first thing he did for me. And then, and then usually I, like, talk to people to, like, work through ideas, like friends and people I meet and stuff like that. And then, and then when it comes to actually shooting and, like, creating it I get a lot of help from friends or people in the community who can help me out.

LA: Who are you in dialogue with when you're producing your work? Like, do you think that you're responding to other video artists, or the communities that you belong to or, like, yourself?

TC: Um, I think probably the communities I belong to more so than other video artists. Yeah, I pretty much make work for my community. I think about who's going to watch it and what they're going to take away from it, how it's going to open people's minds to different issues that I'm working with or that other people are dealing with.

LA: I'm curious about your relationship to technology. Do you consider yourself specifically a *video* artist or a filmmaker or are you just, like, an artist in general. What do you call yourself?

TC: Yeah, that's hard cause there's like this really, like, people are really argumentative about the definition of filmmaker or video artist. And there's like a definite split between them for a long time. And then people started just saying filmmaker for everything. And I guess right now I identify as a filmmaker, even though I don't really shoot on film anymore. But, um, but yeah, the last video I did was shot on a Red camera, which is a little bit more cinematic than, like the other video cameras I've worked with. But originally I, like identified as a video artist cause I was making, like, pretty experimental work with like a Handycam, and, um, it's a different process I think than doing film work. But now I've kind of accepted being a filmmaker, cause I do work with film sometimes too, so, yeah.

LA: Yeah, no, sometimes I don't know, like, what to refer to you, so I'm like...

TC: [laughs] Yeah, I think you can use all of it, yeah.

LA: But yeah, for technology, has it been about, just what you have access to a lot of the time, or, like, why are you using certain cameras over others?

TC: Yeah, it really depends on what I have access to and how big my budget is. Like, when I, when I don't have a very big budget I've been using my HDV camera, which isn't as good as the ones that are like, cause it still uses a tape so it's a little bit older than the ones that people are using now that use those little cards. But yeah it just depends on what I have access to, really. Like, I'll try to use the best if I can but that's not always possible.

LA: Speaking of which, I'm interested in the role of funding and how you've been able to support yourself, or, like, struggle to support yourself, depending on what the case is. Do you depend a lot on grants, or how has it been to be an artist in Canada?

TC: Yeah, I, like, have depended on grants a lot. I haven't gotten, like I definitely don't get every grant I apply for. But when I do, it's really helped me out. But a lot of my work is actually self-funded. A lot of them have been one hundred dollar videos where you just get some people in a space and shoot. Buying food and props is pretty much like all I spend money on. But there has, there has been a few videos where I've had, like, bigger budgets, so, yeah.

LA: So, my particular project is concerned with the idea of resistance and thinking how it's understood and talked about in film and media studies, to give you a little background. But more specifically, I'm interested in how resistance can look like active confrontation as well as how it can also look like an artist creating work on their own terms and for their own communities. I was wondering if you think of your work as resistance, or if you think it's political, or—?

TC: Um, yeah, definitely I think it's political and resistance. I think like, I kind of believe that saying that the personal is political cause a lot of my work deals with identity politics. But also with that identity, it's like, because it's a lot stuff about race and gender and sexuality, it's like, also deals with racism and homophobia and sexism and so it's like, I think those are political things really. Like, I think, I think people kind of talk down about identity politics but it impacts our lives, so yeah.

LA: I've heard some filmmakers describe filming as kind of having, as being a process of healing or being like a kind of therapy, do you find that that's the case for you, or?

TC: Um, yeah sometimes. Like, I don't really, I don't really make work for therapy reasons. Like, I know some people do and there's like a big debate about the validity of it. But, I mean, sometimes talking about something just helps me work through it. Like, uh, like I made one video that was, I made it at the time I had a breakup and it's like, it was called "Helpless Maiden" and it really is a breakup video but I was kind of talking to my ex-girlfriend at the same time that I was pretending to talk to this evil queen, and it really helped me out. But, you know, like, I also had other things going on, other reasons I made that video, so it wasn't just a breakup video.

LA: Yeah, yeah, yeah, there's a lot going on in that video.

TC: Yeah.

LA: I was curious about what you think about the role of humour in your work, especially given the more serious subject matter that you cover.

TC: Um, yeah, I find humour's really good for getting your point across to people who might be more resistant to it. Like, it, if people can laugh about something then they usually let their guards down a bit and are more open to seeing things from a different point of view. Cause, yeah, if you're like being really stern and lecturing people in a video then they're just like, "Oh, whatever, I'm not gonna listen to this anymore."

LA: Yeah, no, that's something that I really admire about your work is actually how it—I think it's very accessible, like, I think I can show some of your work to a wide range of people and they'd be able to, like, there isn't that alienating factor that comes with a lot video art sometimes.

TC: Yeah.

LA: And I think the humour is definitely part of that. What have the reactions to your videos been like across the different communities you're apart of?

TC: They've been generally positive. I think maybe, like, some of my earlier work like "Untouchable" had some, some kind of negative reactions, like, just around the content and, um, yeah. So that was kind of interesting.

LA: What were the reactions?

TC: Like, um, oh, I had a show in a gallery and they were showing that video and someone who was involved with the gallery called the vice squad, so the police came and they were like, "Oh this is okay actually." But it was still weird that they even did that. So yeah, and um.

LA: What were they objecting to, was it the nudity?

TC: I think the nudity and just, like, the content, they were, like, not sure if it was like child porn.

LA: Okay.



TC: But obviously I was too old.

LA: Yeah.

TC: Yeah. So, it was a very weird thing. That video, I still feel kind of weird about that video just cause I feel like I can't talk about it. I feel like I don't have the right to talk about it anymore cause I'm older now. So I feel like it was really specific to the age I was when I made it. So it's kind of hard for me to talk about now. But yeah, that was probably the most negative reaction I had. And then, oh! But the first video I ever made "Lessons in Baby Dyke Theory", that was about being a teenage lesbian and actually the Alberta legislature, they had a big debate cause it was in a gay and lesbian film festival in Calgary and they said it was a lesbian recruiting video and they had a big cow and yeah that festival didn't get funded again the next year, and it was a big mess, yeah.

LA: Minus the lack of funding that resulted, like, I would be kind of proud of that. Did you feel of like?

TC: [laughing] Yeah. Yeah.

LA: Like, screw you Alberta legislature!

TC: [laughing] Yeah.

LA: I think it's interesting that you were talking about, well, "Untouchable" and the issue of age cause I think it's something you touch on in several of your earlier videos at least. And I think it's an, I think it's an often overlooked factor in terms of thinking about how oppression operates. I was wondering if you could talk a bit about your decision to highlight youth or age as a factor that plays into oppression.

TC: I think just because I was living through it at the time, like um, like when I came out as a teenager I was trying to get involved in the gay and lesbian community and, like, so much of that community was really focused around alcohol and, just, spaces where, like, youth could not get in. There was like a youth group in town but there wasn't like—I think there was a dance we could go to but there really wasn't much that we had access to. Not like, "today they have so much more!" But today they do really have so much more! But, yeah, back then, like, it was, I was really feeling shut out of the community. And then, just other things that you feel about being young. Like, kind of that alienated youth feeling, yeah.

LA: I also noticed a recurring tendency to use interpersonal relationships to describe or explore systems of oppression slash violence. What do you think is the value of looking to the, kind of, interpersonal to talk about these systemic problems?

TC: It's hard for me to say. I guess just because those problems you feel are interpersonal. Like when you're being oppressed it's not just the system, like, there's people actively promoting the system that get in your way or keep you down, you know? Yeah.

LA: I actually only have like one more question.

TC: Okay.

LA: Which is just, what's coming up for you? I don't know...

TC: Well actually that's a good question cause I just finished my Master's degree, Master of Arts in Media Production at Ryerson. And while I was there I wrote a feature film script about a woman who gets this power from a supernatural force where she can set people on fire with her mind and she kind of goes on a, it's kind of a revenge film where she goes after these people who are hunting these Indigenous women and so she hunts them down, and yeah.

LA: That sounds amazing.

TC: Yeah, yeah, so I'm hoping to find a producer and get it made in the next couple of years.

LA: I really hope that that works out.

TC: Yeah.